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ENHANCING BUSINESS COMMUNICATION SKILLS: AN ACTION RESEARCH

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Norazah Khamis¹⁺
Wahiza Wahi²

¹Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia. Email: <u>norazahkhamislibrary@gmail.com</u> ²School of Liberal Studies (CITRA UKM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia. Email: <u>wawa@ukm.edu.my</u>



ABSTRACT

Article History

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Keywords Collaborative action research Communication skills English language proficiency Higher education Graduate employability. This collaborative action research involving a lecturer and a student researcher intended to enhance a group of final-year students' business communication skills to prepare them for employment. This study deployed the action research cycle: Identify-Plan-Act-Reflect. The pre-test results found that students had difficulties communicating confidently and interacting clearly in group discussions, and they were unable to exhibit good impression and perception during the discussions. Therefore, a teaching intervention was designed and executed to improve confidence in communicating, clarity when speaking and improvise business etiquette in a group discussion among the students. The five elements emphasized in the teaching intervention are business etiquette, pronunciation, discourse management, interactive communication and confidence. The post test results showed that the intervention has significantly improved the students' confidence and pronunciation. This indicates that the action research study managed to enhance students' business communication competencies.

Contribution/ Originality: The study is one of the very few studies which have investigated the action research cycle: Identify-Plan-Act-Reflect which is found in the teaching intervention of business communication skills elements of business etiquette, pronunciation, discourse management, interaction, and confidence had significantly improved student's confidence and pronunciation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The QS (2019) highlights that three significant skills expected by employers worldwide consist of problem solving, communication and teamwork. These are crucial competencies that future graduates should focus on prior to entering the job market. In this regard, being proficient in English is deemed necessary as it enhances successful business communication, opens avenues for job and business opportunities, builds and develops international relationships, and also helps in the growth of an organization. This is especially true given that most organizations significantly require their employees to be eloquent in their presentations, discussions, and conferences. A study by Ismail (2011) reveals that the prospect of being employed is higher amongst graduates with a good command of English and who possess leadership and technical skills than those without these skills. Hence, this has instigated the researchers to explore English language proficiency and communication skills for workplace readiness among final year degree students majoring in business at a public university.

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This collaborative action research involving a lecturer and a student researcher intended to enhance a group of final-year students' business communication skills to prepare them for employment. During the initial discussion with the undergraduate students and the class lecturer, the student researcher discovered that the most significant problems encountered by almost every student in the class that she was given permission to work with are low confidence and incorrect pronunciation of words. Indeed, the undergraduate students were observed communicating complacently in their mother tongue using extensively casual language expressions. Hence, the student researcher decided that there was a need for her to pay high attention to enhancing the students' confidence and pronunciation in her business communication skills plan. Another skill which was found lacking from her observation during her first meeting with the students is business etiquette. Although their business etiquette was not significantly weak, the student researcher believe that it is an important essence of business communication skills. This is due to the fact that impression, perception, and belief of others are imperative in any professional and business contexts. Therefore, the student researcher has identified five components – business etiquette, pronunciation, discourse management, interactive communication, and confidence – to be incorporated in her intervention plan which is to enhance the students' business communication skills.

This action research aimed to rectify students' difficulties to communicate in English in a workplace-like situation which is implemented through the following research objectives, namely: (1) to enhance students' ability to communicate confidently in a group discussion, (2) to enhance students' ability to interact with clarity in a group discussion, and (3) to enhance students' ability to portray a good impression in conducting group discussion.

More specifically the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

(1) Can students interact actively in a group discussion?

(2) What is the suitable intervention teaching strategy to help students to communicate clearly and confidently?

(3) To what extent does the intervention strategy facilitate students' ability to communicate clearly and confidently in a business-like manner?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2017, the Human Resource Minister reported that over 200,000 graduates were unemployed in Malaysia (Martin, Hermanathani, Rahimy, & Akil, 2017). This is alarming given the abundant efforts made by Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions to remedy local graduates' predicaments in communication skills, English language literacy and critical thinking so as to prepare them to be compatible to the needs of the industries. Nor (2017) notes that low proficiency in English and lack of experience with the real-world situations are the main factors hindering graduates from securing employment. A number of studies on graduates' employability in Malaysia (Ambigapathy & Shanti, 2013; Ting, Marzuki, Chuah, Misieng, & Jerome, 2017; Wahi, 2014) have mentioned a massive gap between the actual graduates' competencies and workplace requirements.

Studies on the graduates' characteristics and unemployment (Musa, Lie, & Azman, 2012) have observed that the challenges were prevalent among the graduates originated from rural areas due to less exposure to speaking English, indeed a majority of them prefer to use the national language as it is the medium of instructions at the public universities. A study conducted by Wahi, Musa, Mohdali, and Hassan (2019) on the literacy skills of undergraduate students categorized as 'at-risk' students (with low-income economic background and low proficiency in English) discloses that the students have acquired technology literacy, teamwork and problemsolving skills. Contrary to the QS (2019) this study reveals that the students are still lacking in communication skills despite going through several communication and compulsory English courses provided by the university to prepare them for the workplace. Yong (2010) states that the higher learning institutions should look into the communication skills of Malaysian tertiary students. Fung further recommends an oracy enhancement program featuring culturally-appropriate literature and dialogue that allow students to interact with different audiences.

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This would enhance active listening and speaking, linguistic and cultural differences that are vital in order to climb the corporate ladder.

Hence, the study of the undergraduate's predicaments in communication skills, particularly in English, needs to be examined by taking specific action namely by having collaborative relationship between university lecturers and student researcher to plan a specific action to be implemented. This has encouraged the researchers to explore English language proficiency and communication skills for workplace readiness among final year degree students majoring in business at a public university.

3. METHODOLOGY

This collaborative action research between a university lecturer (practicum supervisor) and a student researcher was conducted on a group of final-year students majoring in business at a public university. The participants for this research were 13 students selected from an English course - Professional Communication. The participants come from different ethnic groups comprising of Malay, Chinese and India. All of them obtained the same score which is Band 4 ¹(competent level) in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), a pre-requisite prior to university enrolment.

Two test instruments were used: (a) pre-test and (b) post-test which was developed by the student researcher and the lecturer (supervisor) of the selected class. Four-phase action research cycle was used for this research namely: (a) Initial reflection phase—based on the lecturer's teaching experience and discussion with the students to determine the focus of teaching and learning on business communication skills, (b) Intervention action plan phase based on the reflection between the lecturer/supervisor and student researcher based on pre-test analysis and literature review, (c) Implementation and data collection phase— conducted by the student teacher then followed by a post-test on the undergraduate students, and (d) Analysis of data and reflection phase—includes discussion and comparison of the pre and post-test findings and reflection on action to be taken. The analytical scheme of answers for both pre and post-tests was described in detail.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Pre-Test

The pre-test consists of a business-like discussion where students conducted a small group discussion with five members on topics of their own choices. This discussion was video recorded for assessment purposes. The objective of the discussion was to provide a platform for the students to express their opinions on selected topics whilst enhancing their proficiency and fluency in English. The video recordings were crucial because they provide accurate and reliable sources of data and that they captured observational occurrence in the group discussions.

For the purpose of this research, three (3) groups were selected out of five (5) groups in the class as potential researched participants for the intervention plan. The video recordings of 3 groups, comprising of a total of 13 students, were analysed using the Pre-Test scales. The scales consist of five elements of business communication skills – (i) Business Etiquette, (ii) Pronunciation, (iii) Discourse Management, (iv) Interactive Communication and (v) Confidence. The scales were adopted and adapted from <u>www.cambridgeenglish.org</u>. These elements were believed to be the most important and core in the business communication aspects. All 13 students were evaluated individually using the Pre-Test scale. The results of the pre-test analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 illustrates the scores (on the scale of 1 to 5) obtained by each student across 5 elements of business communication skills - business etiquette, pronunciation, discourse management, interactive communication and confidence- as indicated in the Pre-Test scale. In terms of Business Etiquette, the students scored between 4.0 to

¹ Band 4 (Competent user) in MUET is equivalent to Band 6.5 of Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) or Cambridge B2 First English (FCE) level

Table-1. Pre-test result.								
Students Business		Pronunciation	Discourse	Interactive	Confidence			
	Etiquette		Management	Communication				
S1	4.0	3.0	2.5	2.5	2.5			
S2	4.5	2.5	2.5	3.0	2.5			
S3	4.5	2.5	3.5	3.0	2.5			
S4	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.5			

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S5

S6

S7

 $\mathbf{S8}$

S9

S10

S11

S12

S13

2.0

3.0

2.5

2.5

2.5

3.0

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2.5

4.5 out of 5.0, which is significantly high as compared to the scores in other elements. So much so this indicates that majority of the students performed well in business etiquettes.

On the contrary, out of 13 students, 12 students scored between 2.0 to 3.0 in Pronunciation. This was identified in the non-standard English phrases that the students used in the group discussion. For example, a student said, "There is nothing to hurt the soil", "plans other plant", "to hold the soil", and "Wheat", or "witt". Incorrect pronunciation of words was also spotted. The students mispronounced many words causing distorted word meanings, for example, "Lock lacked eyes contact and was referring to his notes more often." The analysis from the video recording disclosed a female student (S5) pronouncing the word "which" as "wis". Initially, she appeared confident when speaking in the group discussion but later she became less confident towards the end of the discussion. Generally, most students were found pronouncing "th" as "d". In some instances, improper stress and words intonation were discovered in the small group discussions. Occasionally, the use of the mother-tongue language, which is the Malay language, was evidenced. The case in point was manifested by a male student (S7) who made a slip of the tongue when asking a question such as "err...apa?", which means "What?" in English.

With regards to Discourse Management, nine out of 13 students scored above 3.0, whereas four students scored below 3.0 due to lack of coherence, cohesion and extended spoken text. Eleven students scored between 3.0 to 4.0, while two students scored between 2.0 to 2.5 for Interactive Communication.

As for Confidence, only one student scored 3.5 while the rest scored less than 3.0. This clearly shows that the students lacked confidence in expressing their opinion, interacting with their group members and managing the discussion.

The above findings generally indicate that Pronunciation and Confidence require high attention. Although the students' scores for Business Etiquette were not significantly weak, the researcher feels that it is vital element to be enhanced as sometimes students might not be aware of. The result of the pre-test analysis was used to determine the components to be included in the intervention plan.

4.2. Action and Implementation Plan

Based on the initial reflection phase and literature review, the lecturer/supervisor and student teacher/researcher designed a teaching strategy aimed at teaching students on how to develop students' business communication skills focusing particular emphasis on the elements of confidence, pronunciation and business etiquette.

It is important to note that the student/researcher had to expedite the intervention plan via online platforms due to the pandemic of Covid-19. Hence, several adjustments were taken into consideration in the conduct of the

intervention to suit the students' situations (participating from home) whilst ensuring that the objectives were achieved at the end of the plan.

Prior to the intervention, "reading" and "watching" tasks were assigned to the students 2 weeks in advance. A structured reading material on the fundamental business communication elements were given to the students through emails. The materials comprising 5 elements of etiquette, pronunciation, discourse management, interactive communication and confidence for business communication skills and professional communication were distributed along with the video links of corporate business discussion for the students to watch and be familiar with.

On the whole, 4 activities were undertaken during the intervention conducted via the Google-Meet platform. In Activity 1, the researcher tried to engage the students with introductory activity for ice-breaking based on notes and videos initially shared to ensure interactive learning. Subsequently, few pronunciation samples and techniques and setting minds leading to confidence were intensively shared during online training via PowerPoint slides.

Several ground rules were shared in Activity 2, pronunciation improving tips were provided, and common mistakes were discussed. Furthermore, mispronunciation samples extracted from the pre-test session were highlighted. The samples demonstrated how mispronunciation distorted words' meaning. For examples, frequently mispronounced words are "wit" as "wheat", "wis" as "which", and "th" as "d". Moreover, confusing phrases were also highlighted, such as, "there is nothing to hurt the soil" or "there is nothing to hold the soil", and "plans other plants". Certain students faced difficulties in grasping the pronunciation correctly despite discussions and tips provided.

Tips and advice to improve confidence level during business discussions, including body language, eye contact, clear mind and focus, were repeatedly given. Although some students were noted playing with pens, several students displayed positive behaviours, occasionally covering their faces, frequently checking notes, avoiding eye contact, and slipping into their mother tongue. Student 4 (S4), student 3 (S3), and student 9 (S9) prepared and handled coherence and cohesion well in discourse management. S4 was fully prepared, while S9 handled coherence and cohesive well despite frequently referring to notes. Conversely, S3 was monotonous and had poor eye contact, although he handled discourse management. Student 11 (S11) also lacked eye contact and referred to notes repeatedly. The majority of the students regularly referred to notes as they lacked the confidence to speak. A student (S1) failed to introduce herself before the task presentation and repeatedly referred to notes. Nevertheless, she performed well in discourse management in terms of business etiquette. Besides, the researcher observed that the clothing choices and colours were primarily informal. The scarves worn were either too long or loose.

In Activity 3, the critical points from the video links were compared, recalled and discussed. In this activity, students were asked to identify good elements and points from the characters in the video and to prepare themselves for the following group discussion.

In Activity 4, students carried out a new group discussion on the same topics. They were evaluated individually with test scales from the pre-test. Each group was allocated 20 minutes for rehearsal before the final group discussion. During the final implementation, several students faced difficulties responding online. The Wi-Fi connection in some districts hindered their efficiency and failed to emulate a business situation. Nonetheless, the students grasped the momentum well as they became enthusiastic and eager to perform well than others.

4.3. Post-Test

All 13 students gave a virtual presentation after a 20 minutes rehearsal within their groups during the post-test presentation. Each student was evaluated individually with the same test scales. The post-test analysis is presented in Table 2.

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Students	Business	Pronunciation	Discourse	Interactive	Confidence
	Etiquette		Management	Communication	
S1	3.5	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0
S2	5.0	4.0	4.5	4.5	4.5
S3	3.5	4.0	4.5	4.0	3.5
S4	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
S5	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
S6	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
S7	5.0	5.5	5.0	5.0	5.0
S8	5.0	5.5	5.0	5.0	5.0
S9	5.0	4.5	5.0	5.0	5.0
S10	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
S11	5.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.5
S12	5.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	4.5
S14	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0

Table-2. Post-test result.

The post-test findings were analysed with the scale employed to evaluate business etiquette, pronunciation, discourse management, interactive communication and confidence. Table 2 shows that 11 students scored 5.0 significantly. Hence, most students could handle business etiquette, including paying attention to appearance and behaviour.

All students scored from 4.0 to 5.0 for pronunciation. Thus, the students had conversed carefully and were alert to correct pronunciation. They could produce sounds of speech, including articulation, individual stress and intonation in pronunciation.

Ten students scored 5.0 for both discourse management and interactive communication, while the rest scored from 4.0 to 4.5, respectively. The students were observed producing extended spoken text, coherence and cohesion.

Contrastingly, eight students scored 5.0, three scored 4.5, and one scored 3.5, although pre-test scores were below 4.0 for the confidence element. Thus, the students had gained confidence and displayed significant improvement in post-test group discussions. They could express their opinion clearly and confidently. Most students did not refer to their scripts and spoke within the time frame.

The analysis' purpose was to compare differences in the students' score before and after the intervention. The final business communication presentations' effectiveness was measured in terms of learners' attitude, performance, and progress test from the beginning of the presentation.

Overall, the results in Table 2 show that all the elements' average scores are above 4.0. In summary, students' confidence level increased significantly, increasing by 2.00 on average out of the five elements. Pronunciation showed the second-highest increasing rates with 1.96. Both confidence and pronunciation improved significantly following the intervention exercise. Business etiquette also increased after the intervention, although the increase was minimal at 0.42.

Figure 1 the comparison of the test scores for pre and post-tests scored by the students for each element.

Figure 1 illustrates the statistical analysis of the pre-test and the post-test average score for the elements evaluated. The bar chart exhibits scores for both pre-test and post-test alongside to portray the average differences straightforwardly.

The students scored an average of 4.35 in the pre-test, whereas post-test scores show a 4.77 average marking a 0.42 point difference for business etiquette. The post-test average was on par with the remaining elements, although the increment was minimal, indicating a significant improvement.

Conversely, the average pre-test score was 2.62, while the post-test score was 4.58 for pronunciation. It marked a 1.96 increase, denoting excellent improvement due to the intervention. In addition, the average pre-test score for discourse management was 3.15, whereas the post-test score was 4.85, indicating a 1.70 increase. The students all scored 3.19 for pre-test and 4.81 for post-test interactive communication, signifying a 1.62 increase.

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Figure-1. Pre-test and post test data analysis (Average)

Initially, the students only scored 2.69 during the pre-test due to unpreparedness and lack of confidence in business discussion presentation. Confidence is the weakest element among business communication skills. Nevertheless, the students gradually gained confidence. They expressed their ideas and opinion during the post-test after the intervention. They applied to visualise the success concept to achieve a 4.69 average score with a 2.00 increase, the most significant improvement among the elements tested.

The confidence level increased by 2.00, whereas pronunciation increased by 1.96 with innovation and intervention. Both confidence level and pronunciation significantly improved altogether. The improvement of confidence levels and pronunciation significantly addressed the issues besides enhancing students' confidence and pronunciation. Business etiquette also improved and achieved the objective by a 0.41 increase. Moreover, the total average score reached par with the other elements to 5.0 scales as most obtained perfect scores. Enhancing business communication skills achieved an average of 1.70 and 1.62 increase for discourse management and interactive communication. The scores indicated the effectiveness of the training as an intervention.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The Five Elements of Business Communication Skills1) Confidence

The students initially lacked confidence during the pre-test while presenting the group discussion. Nevertheless, students eagerly demonstrated excitement in producing their best with confidence. The scores exhibited a significant increase in pre and post-test scores. The students built their confidence by voicing their ideas and opinions expressively. They were able to apply it to visualise the success concept. They no longer read from the scripts, showed correct facial expression and had the right eye contact during the presentation. They used relevant body language minimally, although the discussion was online. The intervention was significantly effective in contributing to students' confidence level.

2) Pronunciation

Initially, the students could not grasp the proper intonation, stress, and individual sounds. During the training, the students were exposed to the techniques and common mistakes. They were requested to practice and rehearsed before the final group discussion. Subsequently, the students displayed significant improvement during the final discussion. Most students mainly were comprehensible despite having limited and little control of phonological features for utterance and word levels. The students managed to pronounce correctly through the intervention. The

"th" sounds and other words were corrected clearly and pronounced perfectly. Students chose the right vocabulary, practised pronouncing them and spoke with clarity.

3) Business Etiquette

Most students were able to project themselves in business etiquette during the pre-test business discussion as they had basic business etiquette understanding despite the minimal improvement observed. Female students' dress colour choices were formal, and their overall appearance reflected improvement. Most students were alert with eye contact, proper body language and addressing each other professionally. The differences between average pre-test and post-test scores, specifically for body language and eye contact, could be higher if the intervention was undertaken in a typical classroom.

4) Discourse Management

The students produced responses that were extended beyond short phrases, despite showing hesitation during the pre-test. Students' discussion was relevant, and essential cohesive devices were evident, although some ideas were repetitious. Additionally, the students utilised various linkers in their sentence structure instead of repetitively using the same linkers during the post-test. Hence, a slight improvement in cohesion after the intervention was noted.

5) Interactive Communication

The students could initiate and appropriately respond while keeping the interaction going with little prompts and support. The students maintained and developed the interaction, initiated and responded appropriately, and negotiated towards an outcome with little support at the end of the post-test. The students could score higher and master business communication with more exposure to interactive communication skills.

Generally, the results of the study indicated that all its objectives were achieved. The first objective aimed to enhance the students' ability to communicate confidently in a group discussion. Confidence in business communication skills among the students was successfully developed and strengthened through the training provided. The second objective focused on enhancing the students' ability to interact clearly in group discussion. The students' scores achieved through the intervention fulfilled the objective. Intonation in pronunciation was mostly appropriate, whilst word stress in sentences was almost accurate. The individual sounds were roughly articulated clearly. The intervention shows the mastery of both skills as there were significant improvements between pre-test and post-test scores. The third objective in enhancing the students' ability to portray good impression and perception in group discussion was achieved. Business etiquette was significantly weak in the beginning but improved the least.

In this research, the students improved by delightedly interacting, endured their roles in tasks enthusiastically, implemented business and professional communication elements during business discussion through training. The students expressed their opinions confidently and did not read from their scripts. They have gained significant confidence in managing various business communication situations. In addition, the intervention effectively enhanced the business communication competencies and improved students' business communicative ability. Bharathy (2013) supported introducing role-play to students to promote English language ability, including speaking actively. According to Bharathy (2013) the combined input of all four skills for both procedures and receptive skills helped students understand the language better.

The students' virtual facial expression portrayed that they appreciated the training. Students' morale was boosted and motivated throughout the interaction during the group discussion despite poor Wi-Fi connection. The study's intervention was a part of the students' optional educational activity in language subjects that contributed to self-esteem in motivation. Burenkova, Arkhipova, Semenov, and Samarenkina (2015) supported that motivation within role-playing is an influential factor in building up students' academic exercise, triggering students' competencies in handling debate, and accomplishing goals amid business communication over constructive activities.

The students significantly produced good individual stress, intonation, and articulation in pronunciation. They also managed their pronunciation correctly. For example, the "th" sounds and other words were corrected clearly and pronounced perfectly. Students chose the right vocabulary and practised pronouncing with clarity. Intonation in pronunciation was mostly appropriate, whilst word stress in sentences was almost accurate. The individual sounds were roughly articulated clearly. Finally, the students produced speech sounds, including articulation, individual stress, and intonation in pronunciation through the intervention.

Business etiquette showed a minimal increase in the post-test after the intervention when both pre-test and post-test scores were compared. The findings could have resulted from the students' existing knowledge of business etiquettes. The students had the basic ability in handling business etiquette before the intervention. The student's business appearance was better after the intervention. Additionally, they approached and addressed their business acquaintances through online business communication presentation professionally.

Furthermore, discourse management and interactive communication also showed enormous development. The students produced extended spoken text, improved in coherence and cohesion for discourse management. Similarly, the students interacted well during the communicative tasks and spoke spontaneously, with significant improvement in interactive communication.

Most students were focused on producing sentence structure, simulating and stimulating through digesting and being alert with lessons learned from reading, watching, and training. The business and professional communication notes, as well as video links provided, helped the students to cope. The online training on business communication tips encouraged students to engage interactively. In addition, the pre-test scores were used as feedback to discuss the students' common mistakes. Students' overall performance in confidence, pronunciation, etiquette, discourse management, and interactive communication was enhanced from this process. Confidence level and pronunciation exhibited significant improvement, while business etiquette improved the least as students could handle business etiquette in the business environment. Overall, the students significantly progressed in the online training, thus enhancing business communication competencies.

Generally, the students were accustomed to cooperation in producing the best in each role and implemented their knowledge during the online training. Moreover, the students expressed eagerness to produce outstanding action by carefully choosing accurate words and constructing sentences studiously in a structured, coherent and cohesive manner. Students occasionally showed slight nervousness but managed well. Notably, the students admitted and appreciated this program as it boosted their confidence and prepared them to face the real business world.

6. CONCLUSION

The study proved that business communication presentation had taught students to debate, enact, and negotiate in real situations. It has demonstrated and justified that navigating a business presentation engagement through the training has significantly enhanced business communication skills among the students. The training would assist them immensely with effective business communication for any form of testing, academics evaluation, real situations and future undertakings. The higher education authorities should re-design business presentation engagement in the universities' curriculum throughout the years. Students can comprehend business communication competencies before graduation to contribute high impact. Additionally, students can intensify outstanding performance with additional practice and ample time to strengthen up. The suggestions could be considered and undertaken in future action research. Future research could assimilate a real-life environment during an internship. Funding: This study received no specific financial support.Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.Acknowledgement: Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study.

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