

## **The Practical Application of Reading Comprehension in Business a Course**

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### **Abstract**

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*This article discusses pedagogy useful for helping business students identify and understand specific gaps that can improve outcomes of business communication skills. The author briefly describes an assessment framework using a practical application of reading comprehension, as context for helping business students to specifically link skills gaps necessary for developing industry-expected skills, that is, how **reading and writing** are intertwined - communication skills.*

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**Key words:** assessment, authentic engagement, business communication skills, career readiness, pedagogy, reading skills, writing skills,

### **1. Introduction**

Can learning how to identify skills gaps help students understanding links in business communication skills? To explore this question, the author examined prior extant literature on bridging gaps in business communication skills. This article discusses pedagogy useful for helping students understand and identify specific gaps that can improve outcomes of business communication skills. For example, business communication skills are often broadly described within the scope of important soft skill attributes, e.g., communication, teamwork, integrity, problem-solving, job-readiness, as this extant literature depict (Abston & Soter, 2020; Chamorro-Premuzic, Artech, Bremner, Greven & Furnham, 2010; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017; Meeks, 2017; Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2020; 2019; Nealy, 2021; 2005; Robles 2012; Winstead, Adams & Sillah, 2009; Zhang, 2012). The literature indicates general agreement among academics and practitioners about the importance of business students developing business communication skills. However, the literature also points out given evolving business environments, applicable changes should be explored in business programs/business communications to prepare students for the workforce.

To illustrate this point, Conrad and Newberry (2011) discussed how the link between different objectives can determine assessments outcomes. They suggested the use of specifically linked objectives to expected outcomes. Considering the myriad of business contexts, it reasonable to suggest use of *tangible* elements connected to *contexts* when teaching students business skills. Rather than use of broadly described business communication skills within the scope of soft skill attributes, i.e., often perceived as intangible (Robles, 2012). While this discussion does not represent a comprehensive review of literature related to business communication skills, the author gleaned practical implications from the listed extant literature about assessing outcomes.

A key takeaway highlighted in this reviewed literature was elements of assessments should be meaningful and help students connect theory (academic) and practice (workplace).

The goal is to make sure students are learning and developing a more informed understanding of expected learning outcomes. It is practical here that this author theorizes engaged and informed students are more likely to develop skills and transfer this knowledge to the workplace. Pedagogically speaking, the assessment process should help both students and professors identify causes of specific skills gaps. To do so, regardless of the program/major, applicable course changes and interventions can be applied to improve the learning process.

For example, although reviewed literature focused on business students, it is not uncommon for non-business majors to take business courses such as business communication. On the learning level, communication skills are top ranked by employers as essential for workforce needs (Coffelt, Baker & Corey, 2016; Finley, 2021; Kemp, 2009; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017; NACA 2020 & 2019; Yu, 2010). Drawing from workforce/employers' recommendations, such as extant literature cited in this discussion, academicians are assessing and developing programs/courses to address perceived skills gaps. The following sections provide a framework to generate ideas useful for assessing students to help them understand and identify skills gaps.

## **2. Tangible Elements**

In the context of linking tangibles to expected outcomes, the author discusses how helping business students understand the connection between reading and writing might offer insight about gaps in business communication skills. For purposes of this article, the author defines reading as a thinking process that involves interpreting and analyzing words, graphs, and other symbols to obtain meaning. Writing is defined as a thinking process that involves discovering, composing, and communicating meanings. The author uses these definitions to presuppose Schlechty's (2002) authentic engagement: "The task, activity, or work the student is assigned or encouraged to undertake is associated with a result or outcome that has a clear meaning and relatively immediate value to the student" (p. 3). Such learning should equip students with an understanding of expected workforce needs within their majors; in this discussion, business students developing skills applicable for evolving business environments.

Despite the importance of workforce expectations, helping students progress from knowing to understanding can be problematic when assigning academic readings. Regardless of the reasons, such as time constraints or difficult academic textbooks, the author suggests most readers of this article might agree, in general, students are often perplexed by expected academic readings. Whatever the cause, recognizing the varying needs of students provides opportunities to develop strategies focusing on *contextualizing* assigned readings. With this salient point in mind, the author *remembered* an article written by Muir (2014) which detailed a practical skill building reading regimen suitable for identifying skills gaps. For this discussion, like Muir's (2014) article, students would be assigned a selected short news article from a business publication to read. They would be instructed to read the article focusing on main ideas (key points) and assertions that support the main ideas. Then, asked to complete a writing assessment designed to test their ability summarizing main ideas and supporting key points of the article. The following shows how to use this reading-writing regimen for assessment purposes.

In planning, with *authentic engagement* of students in mind, it is important to establish a framework for them to understand expected learning outcomes. Both students and professors should discuss specific learning outcomes: discuss expected outcomes, administer/gather data, review data/provide feedback- necessary for identifying skills gaps – implement interventions/track progress. A helpful instructional strategy to use is scaffolding (timing) assessments within the scope of closing identified skills gaps. For example, in this discussion, a key element in establishing the foundation is selection of the first news article. The news article's main idea should specifically focus on the integral role of business communication skills (reading and writing) as it relates to business majors career readiness. If needed, contact your on-campus librarian or business librarian liaison for a short list of available free resources, i.e., print or online, related to the subject area. For instance, Muir (2014) suggested use of *The Wall Street Journal*, this publication has made timely upgrades and currently offers numerous resources for professors and students suitable to design assessments with criteria for evaluating students' skills.

Ideally, reading the news article should enable students to apply prior knowledge to specific basic skills - reading and writing – useful for identifying gaps in business communication skills. To help students recognize this connection, assessment strategies must take into consideration that learning styles vary, therefore, learning goals should be specifically linked to expected outcomes. This should facilitate identifying skills gaps that can be used to determine applicable interventions designed to track learning improvements.

These improvements should be able to demonstrate as cited by Muir (2014) ... “a creative learner will combine information gleaned from diverse sources to form new knowledge” (Muir, 2014, p. 29). To this point, for scaffolding and tracking improvements, Muir (2014) recommended using Anderson & Krathwohl’s (2001) revised Bloom’s Taxonomy. In short, Krathwohl (2002) offered the following description “...Taxonomy of Educational Objectives is a framework for classifying statements of what we expect or intend students to learn as a result of instruction (p. 212). .... Based on this examination, teachers can decide where and how to improve the planning of curriculum and the delivery of instruction” (p. 218).

Planning learning activities using revised Bloom’s Taxonomy takes into consideration meeting the needs of a variety of students at different levels. A key element involves including at least one activity from the six levels of this taxonomy below. The base- Levels 1-3 are low domains and Levels 4-6 are high domains.

- Level 1: Remember - Retrieving relevant knowledge from long-term memory.
- Level 2: Understand - Determining the meaning of instructional messages, including oral, written, and graphic communication.
- Level 3: Apply - Carrying out or using a procedure in a given situation.
- Level 4: Analyze - Breaking material into its constituent parts and detecting how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose.
- Level 5: Evaluate - Making judgments based on criteria and standards.
- Level 6: Create - Putting elements together to form a novel, coherent whole or make an original product.

Source: Krathwohl, D. (2002).

It is worth mentioning here that in business communication courses, business majors develop and practice basic principles of thinking strategically. This is a core objective given the transactional (influencing factors) of communication within evolving business environments. Students should be able to think before writing, i.e., analyze the reason for communicating, audience, content, and method of delivery. Hence, using revised Bloom’s Taxonomy in this assessment should not only develop reading-writing skills, but allow practice of thinking skills when scaffolding from lower-level domains to higher domains.

To this point, while some students might -think- they are skilled at reading and writing, the beginning of the semester is the ideal time to emphasize continuous improvement for both - academic and career opportunities within their majors. Scheduling the assessment week one of the semester might prompt students’ academic responsibility. For example, as suggested above, if scaffolded, the first reading will serve as a diagnostic assessment to determine if students understand the (link between reading and writing) within the scope of expected industry skills for business majors. Fittingly, given the placement of this assessment, before coursework, this assessment should focus on revised Bloom’s lower three domains (Level 1: Remember, Level 2: Understand, Level 3: Apply) to establish a baseline of - what students know and are able to – apply.

The data gathered have mutual benefits to both students and professors helpful, for navigating development and practice of identified skills gaps. Planned coursework with specifically linked assessments should provide students with insight about how to identify – develop – practice- and document skills expected by prospective employers. A guiding principle in this undertaking is to provide a supportive environment that minimizes students’ anxieties related to performance/grades.

With this point in mind, starting with the first meeting of the semester, to promote a supportive environment that minimize students’ anxieties, have a positive transparent discussion about key elements of the assessment. This should include frequently asked questions about grade impact. Typically, having the discussion at this stage allows opportunity to explain low stakes assessments, i.e., diagnostic assessments that has low grade impact. The assessments focus on helping students understand feedback and time to continuously improve skills gaps all semester. The goal is for students to develop a broader sense of understanding about links in business communication skills. Of particular importance, is to emphasize development of skills via the use of specifically linked objectives to expected outcomes. By doing so, students should be able to identify skills gaps, i.e., the connection between reading and writing in the communication process.

For example, applying revised Bloom's **Level 1: Remember**: A useful strategy before the assignment might involve a lively discussion with the professor sharing personal examples about how reading and writing skills are developed over time. The discussion could use examples describing causes of reading difficulties, e.g., not adjusting the reading process or inadequate vocabulary, which can impact writing. This reality-based discussion could foster students understanding of learning styles differ, thus, low stakes assessment has meaning and value to the students. This is a practical method for developing students understand about ungraded descriptive feedback. Explaining the link between reading and writing to the communication process, should help students with *remembering* prior information necessary for making contextual adjustments.

Normally, at the beginning of a semester to build rapport and help students understand professors, discuss course objectives, and expected learning outcomes. The discussion might involve examples of assessment of learning using graded feedback on coursework. It is plausible to note here- students with skills gaps may not have sufficient competencies to decipher feedback (Campbell, 2016; Garner & Shank, 2018). A crucial part of the discussion must involve explaining the feedback. With the diagnostic assessment linking reading and writing discussed above, the process embeds scheduled ungraded descriptive feedback to students that clarifies what is needed during practice to improve specific skills gaps. Thereby, students would have opportunities to reflect on feedback, ask questions about specific feedback, focus and work on identified gaps, and recognize immediate value of these assessments. It is conceivable, this perceived value may help students develop a more informed understanding of what is expected of them, i.e., improving business communication skills, rather than focusing solely on grade impact.

Examples of learning activities to help students include explaining main ideas, asking questions, and making connections - including discussions (rethinking the reading process, developing business terms, impact of reading on writing, readiness assessments/questions asking student to describe main ideas in articles, grading and feedback processes), notetaking (individual and sharing during class discussions), and student's reflection on the connection between reading and writing. This assignment *specifically links* reading and writing, i.e., review causes of reading difficulties (e.g., limited understanding of reading academic/course textbooks, limited business vocabulary, limited contextual relevance, etc.) – and - review basic skills of writing targeting common errors (e.g., concise, grammatical, punctuated, etc.) in business writing.

During planning of the assessment, for baseline purposes, a soft number, i.e., two -four, should be useful to help students identify specific skills gaps linked to (reading and writing). These assessments should be designed as diagnostic low-grade impact that encourages students' continuous improvement of skills rather than a reluctance based on grade impact. It is important to point out here, the assessment should prompt *authentic engagement of* both students and professors. While these assessments might be perceived as time-consuming, students addressing skills gaps and professors' grading; both should *recall* discussions related to such questions – Are business majors equipped with industry-expected skills? “Do you give students a set of skills that is going to serve them well over their careers?” (MacDermott and Ortiz, 2017, p. 4)

With these questions in mind, in the following, based on cited extant literature, and key elements above, ideas for instructional strategies are offered.

### **1.1 Contexts**

From a pedagogical perspective, revised Bloom's Taxonomy is suggested to reinforce planning instructional activities/assessments that promote *authentic engagement* of business students understanding – specifically- the link between reading and writing.

As stated previously, for baseline assessment purposes, the first news article should focus on the (link between reading and writing) within the scope of expected industry skills for business majors. The article should prompt attention – students see value of the assessment- in terms of personal and professional growth. In brief, the article's main idea could explain how reviewing reading and writing skills help develop business communication skills related to employability -prospective employers. Students would be asked to read the article for main ideas (key points) and assertions that support the main ideas. After reading the article, students would be asked to write a two-page reflection (200-250 words). The paper should be planned assuming findings will be shared with other business students within the same declared business major. In the paper, students would be asked to summarize the main idea of the article (what you learned from the article as a business major) and explain (identify a specific skill) specific steps to improve the skill with benchmarks for determining progress.

This brief description of the first reading provides some background and rationale for how revised Bloom's Taxonomy could be embedded to scaffold assessments. Such framework should foster students learning experiences ranging revised Bloom's lower three domains (Level 1: Remember, Level 2: Understand, Level 3: Apply) and higher domains (Level 4: Analyze, Level 5: Evaluate, and Level 6: Create). These assessments could be structured to help students apply prior knowledge with a goal of identifying specific skills gaps. Thereby, enabling students to *rethink* and apply new strategies based on tangible findings while *recontextualizing* prior understanding.

### **111. Conclusion**

Based on the author's experiences in teaching business courses and related research, Muir's (2014) article provides a reasonable framework to support pre-assessments of skills before assigning reading of academic/textbook chapters. Linked in this manner, should help students *understand* pre-assessments as an opportunity to rethink development of their communication skills rather than using unsubstantiated reasoning. Hence, within the scope of Conrad and Newberry (2011) suggestion, using *specific linked objectives* to expected outcomes might help students understand how *reading and writing* are intertwined - communication skills.

The framework used to discuss assessment strategies in this article is adaptable for other modifications applicable to learning objectives/settings. As noted above, although this article discusses pedagogy to help business students bridge gaps in business communication skills, the implications might be generalized in other academic programs. Irrespective of students' field of study they will need reading and writing skills to communicate. This discussion's instructional strategies can be planned to improve reading and writing skills – not basic literacy (lacking prerequisite skills to participate and engage in the academic setting). Emphasizing to business students the importance of reading and writing in the business communication process should help them understand academic work assigned has personal and professional values. To do so, might also help both students and professors understand and act on industry feedback about skills gaps.

As stated in the above cited extant literature, for decades, business communication skills gaps have been studied by academicians, diverse industry representatives and professional organizations. During these collaborations, assessment data were examined that provided diagnostic/causes of skills gaps. To determine the effectiveness of these collaborations' findings, academicians should be able to use and/or modify pedagogical approaches benchmarked as best practices for engaging and tracking learning outcomes. By using assessment data, interventions can be applied which focus on continuous improvement through analyzing the needs of all stakeholders.

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