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A Behavioural Needs Analysis in Professional Communication Education

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Abstract

This study investigates the behavioural engagement of 97 diploma students in a professional communication course at a Malaysian public university. Four domains were examined: class participation, task completion, attention and effort, and use of digital tools. A quantitative survey comprising 20 Likert-scale items was used. Descriptive analysis revealed high task completion but low participation and digital engagement. Attention and effort were moderate. The results suggest that students are task-oriented but less actively involved or digitally responsive. Findings highlight a need for more interactive, student-centred, and blended approaches better to align communication course design with learner engagement needs.

Keywords: behavioural engagement, professional communication, needs analysis, diploma students

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DOI:

1.0 Introduction

Effective communication continues to top the priority list for employers hiring university graduates, who increasingly demand the ability to articulate ideas clearly, confidently, and adaptively in both written and oral formats. Investigations into Malaysian higher education have documented a persistent gap in graduates' communication skills, raising doubts about how well university training meshes with the expectations marketers, engineers, and other employers proclaim (Yaacob et al., 2020). While the importance of the skill is broadly acknowledged, programmes at the diploma level typically default to lecture-heavy formats that privilege information dissemination over interactive, practice-driven pedagogies. Such a default risks stalling the development of behavioural engagement related to involvement grounded in overt actions such as asking questions, submitting assignments on time, sustaining attention, and collaborating on projects (Balaton et al., 2021). Existing studies have concentrated on the emotional and cognitive dimensions of engagement. However, behavioural indicators remain surprisingly thin, particularly in communication disciplines where the demonstration of practice is at the curricular core. Systematic observation of how and when students exhibit these behaviours; questioning peers, respecting deadlines, maintaining focus during activities, and leveraging asynchronous learning environments can thus yield actionable data about whether the programme meets its objectives and where learner support might be further refined.

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DOI:

Prior research indicates that learners sometimes follow the requirements of a course without the deeper participation that interactive pedagogies intend to stimulate (Henrie et al., 2015). Investigations of this phenomenon within Malaysian professional communication courses remain scarce. A clearer picture of such behavioural tendencies could inform the construction of curricula that respond to learners' engagement needs through responsive, participatory, and technology-enhanced strategies. Considering this gap, the present study employs a structured questionnaire to probe the behavioural engagement of 97 diploma students enrolled in a professional communication module. By concentrating on attendance in interactive tasks, submission of assignments, exerted mental and physical effort, and utilisation of digital platforms, we seek to map engagement trajectories and detect mismatches between the course's pedagogical designs and learners' interaction patterns.

2.0 Literature Review

This section outlines current perspectives on the importance of communication skills in higher education, explores the theoretical and practical dimensions of student engagement, and narrows the focus to behavioural engagement within communication courses. By identifying relevant findings and research gaps, the review supports the need for examining how students behave and interact in communication classrooms, especially in diploma-level programmes where participation, task fulfilment, and digital tool usage are critical to learning success.

2.1 Communication Skills in Higher Education

Communication has been acknowledged as an indispensable graduate competency that transcends disciplinary and sectoral boundaries. Employers persistently rank written and oral communication as paramount for contemporary organisational success (Melugbo et al., 2021). Recent appraisal, however, has sharpened the focus beyond basic literacy; the contemporary workplace increasingly requires graduates to present with authority, foster professional discourse, navigate interpersonal dynamics, and distil intricate ideas into lucid and persuasive language. Consequently, universities face heightened accountability to ensure that communication curricula yield tangible skills closely aligned with occupational requirements. In Malaysia, empirical work has repeatedly documented a disconnect between the communication training students experience and the exigencies they face after graduation. Research indicates that new graduates frequently falter under real-time communicative pressures—delivering presentations, brokering negotiations, or composing detailed reports—all of which are routine in professional environments (Salim et al., 2023; Yaacob et al., 2020). Karim and Karim (2024) attribute the shortfall, in part, to the dominant pedagogical design of communication courses, which tend to favour theoretical exposition while leaving insufficient space for task-oriented assignments, collaborative projects, or simulation-based exercises that promote adaptive practice.

2.2 Student Engagement in Learning

Research across educational settings has consistently identified student engagement as a vital determinant of long-term learning success and academic persistence. Defined broadly, engagement encompasses the intensity of student interest, the quality of motivation, and the degree of active involvement within the academic context. This multidimensional construct includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components; yet, behavioural engagement frequently offers the most precise empirical data on student responses to pedagogical choices and learning contexts (Suhendi et al., 2021; Naibert et al., 2022). Specifically, behavioural engagement captures outward manifestations of participation such as class attendance, contribution to discussions, completion of assessments, and interaction with digital learning supports. These visible behaviours serve as proxies for the deeper investment of time and energy, ultimately facilitating mastery of complex content. Within communication studies, behavioural engagement assumes even greater salience. Students are prone to disengagement when instructional designs omit autonomy, personal relevance, and opportunities for collaborative exchange (Shah et al., 2024). This claim resonates acutely in communication curricula, often dominated by lectures, where learners may dutifully finish assignments yet remain inert in applying theories to realistic, dynamic situations. Moreover, the growing prominence of technology-rich educational environments necessitates student engagement now encompassing their interactions with digital ecosystems—learning management systems, threaded discussions, and messaging applications (Yusuf et al., 2024; Murugan et al., 2024). These technological advancements prompt educators to reconsider their approaches to facilitating learning, ensuring that the educational digital platforms used are not merely functional but also align with the social and emotional needs of students. Digital engagement strategies should account for the diverse access levels and varying degrees of digital literacy among students, which can significantly impact their participation and success in these virtual spaces.

2.3 Behavioural Engagement in Communication Courses

Professional communication curricula inherently demand experiential learning, interactive practice, and the cultivation of skills that can transfer across contexts. Nevertheless, many diploma-level programs persist in applying predominantly lecture-oriented methods, constraining student engagement frequency and depth (Shah et al., 2025). Applied activities such as oral presentations and structured group discussions frequently require minimal scheduling, resulting in noticeable behavioural withdrawal. Salim et al. (2020) reported that learners often register a form of surface participation by fulfilling formal requirements while remaining muted and uninteractive, a pattern they attributed to anxiety about speaking and scant immersion in authentic communicative circumstances. In a systematic needs analysis of English communication for the workplace, Yaacob et al. (2020) determined that Malaysian learners, despite solid theoretical examination results, characteristically enter the job market with insufficient practical communicative exposure. The integration of contemporary technology introduces a further complicating factor. Thus, there is a need for well-structured pedagogical approaches that contribute to a more interactive learning experience and facilitate better communication skills and student empowerment.

Courses that emphasise critical engagement strategies can enhance learners' abilities to interact meaningfully within their communities (Burton & Winter, 2024). Understanding these interconnected dynamics is essential in crafting curricula that not only perform well theoretically but also prepare students practically for real-world communication scenarios. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this area by analysing four interrelated behavioural dimensions: frequency and quality of class participation, punctuality and thoroughness in task completion, patterns of attention and effort during instructional activities, and engagement with designated learning platforms in a public university professional communication course.

3.0 Research Methodology

This investigation employed a quantitative, descriptive research framework to examine the behavioural engagement of ninety-seven diploma students enrolled in a professional communication course at a Malaysian public university. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, necessitating current enrolment in the course and completing at least one communication-related assessment. Data collection occurred via a self-administered online questionnaire distributed through Google Forms, which contained twenty Likert-scale items—five for each of the four engagement domains: participation in class activities, assignment completion, attention and effort, and utilisation of learning tools or platforms. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Instrumentation was adapted from extant engagement frameworks (Fredricks et al., 2004; Henrie et al., 2015) and underwent expert validation by two scholars in communication and educational psychology, resulting in minor lexical amendments. The survey was available for one week, participation was voluntary, and anonymity of respondents was preserved. To enhance clarity and mitigate respondent fatigue, the questionnaire was designed for completion within ten minutes. Engagement patterns across the domains were characterised through descriptive statistics, specifically mean scores and standard deviations. No inferential statistics were utilised because the primary aim was to map broad behavioural trends rather than to evaluate specific hypotheses. The calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each subscale surpassed the threshold of 0.70, indicating that the measurement instrument provided an acceptable level of internal consistency for assessing behavioural engagement in diploma-level learners.

4.0 Findings

This section presents the descriptive findings for the four behavioural engagement variables: participation in class activities, task completion, attention and effort, and use of learning tools or platforms. Mean scores (M) and standard deviations (SD) were calculated for all 20 items, grouped under their respective dimensions. Results are presented in order of highest to lowest overall engagement. Table 1 shows the findings of the study.

Table 1. Descriptive Results Based on Variables and Items

Variable	Item Statement	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Task Completion	I submit my communication assignments on time.	3.21	0.81
	I complete all course-related tasks without reminders.	3.3	0.75
	I follow instructions carefully in every task.	3.25	0.7
	I review and revise my work before submission.	3.2	0.8
	I rarely miss any class-related tasks.	3.1	0.85
Attention & Effort	I stay focused during lessons.	3.05	0.69
	I put effort into understanding complex topics.	3.12	0.72
	I take notes to help maintain focus.	3	0.68
	I participate actively even when tired or distracted.	2.95	0.74
	I try to stay on task throughout the lesson.	3.1	0.7
Participation in Class Activities	I frequently participate in class discussions.	2.84	0.76
	I often ask or answer questions during lessons.	2.75	0.8
	I contribute ideas during group tasks.	2.91	0.72
	I take part in role-plays or simulations.	2.6	0.85
	I feel confident speaking in front of the class.	2.78	0.78
Use of Learning Tools or Platforms	I regularly access the LMS for course materials.	2.65	0.88
	I use digital tools to improve my communication skills.	2.7	0.82
	I check for announcements on LMS frequently.	2.55	0.9
	I submit tasks through online platforms without delay.	2.75	0.79
	I find digital tools useful for learning.	2.6	0.86

Task Completion recorded the highest overall engagement among students, with mean scores ranging from 3.10 to 3.30. The highest-rated item under this variable was *"I complete all course-related tasks without reminders"* (M = 3.30, SD = 0.75), suggesting that most students are disciplined in meeting assignment requirements. Other items, such as submitting assignments on time and following instructions, also received relatively strong agreement, indicating consistent task-oriented behaviours. Attention and Effort followed with moderate engagement scores, ranging from 2.95 to 3.12. The item *"I put effort into understanding difficult topics"* had the highest mean (M = 3.12, SD = 0.72). At the same time, *"I participate actively even when tired or distracted"* received a slightly lower mean (M = 2.95, SD = 0.74). This suggests that while students try to maintain focus, fluctuations in energy or attention may impact their overall classroom engagement. Participation in Class Activities showed lower engagement levels than task-related behaviours, with means between 2.60 and 2.91. The item *"I take part in role-plays or simulations"* recorded the lowest mean among all participation items (M = 2.60, SD = 0.85), whereas *"I contribute ideas during group tasks"* received the highest (M = 2.91, SD = 0.72). These results suggest that students are more comfortable with group collaboration than speaking in front of larger audiences or performing in simulated contexts.

Use of Learning Tools or Platforms recorded the lowest engagement scores among the four dimensions, with means ranging from 2.55 to 2.75. The item *"I submit tasks through online platforms without delay"* had a moderate mean ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.79$), while *"I check for announcements on the LMS frequently"* had one of the lowest means ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 0.90$). The data suggest a constrained interaction with the course's digital components, characterised by uneven leverage of the learning management system and external communication applications. Students demonstrate a pattern of assignment compliance without corresponding investment in collaborative or digital practices. Such behaviour points to a possible divergence between the course structure and the learners' apparent inclination toward learning settings that prioritise interactivity, practical engagement, and integrated use of technology.

5.0 Discussion

The survey results indicate a distinctive engagement profile among diploma students enrolled in a professional communication course: high rates of assignment submission, moderate attention and effort, and markedly limited participation in face-to-face and digital learning environments. Assignment completion constituted the most consistent behaviour, with students reliably delivering work and adhering to submission guidelines. This pattern corresponds with "surface-level engagement," in which learners meet explicit requirements without necessarily internalising or operationalising the learning outcomes (Curtis et al., 2020). While on-time submission contributes to overall accountability, it is unlikely to foster the deeper cognitive processing required for the nuanced competencies central to professional communication. Moderately recorded attention and effort suggest that students tend to direct attention to learning tasks but face difficulties when instructional segments extend in length or adopt passive formats. Rapanta et al. (2021) note that diminished classroom autonomy and limited interactive opportunities can hinder the maintenance of focused engagement. The partially engaged profile is particularly concerning in communication pedagogy, which hinges on recurrent, experiential practice, and suggests that the prevailing instructional design may require recalibration to sustain attentional investment. Participation metrics corroborate these concerns, as students rated their involvement in role-plays and public-speaking exercises as disappointingly low; the mean scores on these items suggest apprehension and insufficient confidence in oral production, findings that support previous work by Salim et al. on speaking anxiety. These findings point to a demographic of learners who complete tasks on schedule but eschew fuller engagement in classroom discourse and digital platforms, leading to a disconnect of preferences, described in earlier literature as a preference for active, participatory, and technology-supported learning environments. To close this gap, course designers should embed participatory strategies that push beyond compliance to foster the performative dimension of communication. Suggested revisions to the curriculum include project-driven assessments, iterative formative peer critique, hybrid learning modules, and carefully planned speaking tasks nested within progressive scaffolds.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This investigation analysed the engagement patterns of diploma-level students enrolled in a professional communication course, targeting four discrete domains: verbal participation in class, completion of assigned tasks, sustained attention and effort, and utilisation of digital learning platforms. The results disclosed a general consistency in task submission and adherence to procedural directives, yet a pronounced deficiency in verbal contributions and the exploitation of digital environments. The data thus suggest a behavioural portrait characterised by compliance with assignment norms yet reticence in interactive dimensions, compelling a reevaluation of course design and pedagogical approach. Elevated task completion rates may signal adherence to evaluative criteria, yet they fail to corroborate a concomitant elevation in depth of engagement (Karim et al., 2020). Intermediate scores on attention and effort imply that pedagogical techniques require recalibration, especially in environments that depend predominantly on transmissive instructional styles. Concurrently, subdued involvement in in-person activities and minimal exploitation of Learning Management Systems correlate with extant literature, which posits that learners typically experience anxiety in performance contexts and engage with digital tools only under deliberate scaffolding and explicit pedagogical purpose (Henrie et al., 2015). The discussion thus culminates in several targeted recommendations. To promote active engagement in communication courses, instructors should integrate project-based locales, immersive simulations, structured role-plays, and modal-rich discussions that compel students to contribute rather than observe. Prior studies demonstrate that these techniques cultivate a greater sense of agency and bolster self-directed learning. Complementarily, course architectures should feature blended modalities that go beyond merely broadcasting course content. Specifically, researchers recommend embedding student-facilitated online forums, tasks built around annotated video clips, and structured, delayed feedback loops that function outside synchronous spaces. Thoughtfully curating these digital elements within learning management systems reinforces and extends in-person modes, furnishing occasions for students to iterate and polish communicative practices across variable contexts (Henrie et al., 2015).

Acknowledgements

The researchers sincerely thank the students who participated in this study for their time and honest responses. Appreciation is also extended to the subject matter experts who provided valuable input during the questionnaire validation process. Special thanks to the faculty of the participating institution for their support and cooperation. This study was conducted independently and received no external funding.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the field of communication education by offering empirical insights into the behavioural engagement patterns of diploma students in professional communication courses. The study highlights critical gaps between instructional delivery and student engagement by focusing on measurable domains such as participation, task completion, attention, and digital tool use. The findings support the need for more interactive, blended, and student-centred pedagogical approaches, providing practical direction for curriculum enhancement in communication-focused programmes, particularly within the Malaysian higher education context.

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