

## RESEARCH ARTICLE:

# Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice: A Critical Exploration of the Applicability of the Communication Skills Learned in the Classroom in Communication Contexts in Organisations

Nonkanyiso Siphephile Khanyile<sup>1</sup>, Sam Erevbenagie Usadolo<sup>2</sup> and Zizipho Mdletye<sup>3</sup>

**Received:** 12 February 2024 | **Revised:** 12 March 2025 | **Published:** 29 April 2025

**Reviewing Editor:** Dr. Joseph Olusegun Adebayo, Cape Peninsula University of Technology

## Abstract

*The study examines the transferability of communication skills learned in academic settings (henceforth 'the classroom') to workplace contexts. Through semi-structured interviews with twelve Language Practice graduates and one lecturer at Durban University of Technology, thematic data analysis was employed to interpret the findings. Results indicate a partial alignment between classroom learning and workplace communication needs, with room for improvement. Graduates utilise classroom techniques acquired at tertiary level to address communication challenges in their organizations but face difficulties adjusting to workplace communication dynamics. The study provides suggestions based on participant expectations and experiences, alongside recommendations for future research. It underscores the importance of bridging the gap between academic and workplace communication to better equip graduates for professional environments.*

**Keywords:** communication context; communication practices; genres; workplace communication

## Introduction

Communication builds and sustains relationships among employees in organisations. For instance, Hargie (2016) states that research has shown that workplace crises often arise due to negative leadership communication. In other words, positive communication from leaders fosters harmonious relationships within organisations, leading to increased productivity and profit gains. In the South African context, Le Roux (2010) explored how organisational communication practitioners can enhance their contributions to workplace advancement. Conversely, poor communication results in decreased productivity, which ultimately leads to reduced profits (Campbell *et al.*, 2020). In many cases, communication within an organisation fails to achieve its intended goals when employees do not adequately consider the prevailing contexts that may influence the message being conveyed. Kern *et al.* (2015) claim that language shapes context, and context, in turn, shapes language. Similarly, Plebe and De La Cruze (2015) argue that the idea of language shaping contexts is not new. However, previous studies have highlighted that various factors influence how language shapes communication within organisations. Therefore, communication learned in the university classroom and in the workplace is likely to be shaped by the prevailing context in which it emerges. This raises concerns about whether the type of communication students are exposed to in the classroom is appropriate for and effectively applicable in the world of work. Thus, examining the nature of communication skills taught at university as part of students' workplace preparation is a necessary area of investigation.

This study highlights key issues in organisational communication by exploring how communication skills are taught in classrooms and applied in the workplace. Often, a gap exists between how communication is learned and how

<sup>1</sup>Durban University of Technology, [21203897@dut4life.ac.za](mailto:21203897@dut4life.ac.za) | <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6495-2848>

<sup>2</sup>Durban University of Technology, [samu@dut.ac.za](mailto:samu@dut.ac.za) | <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6291-7680>

<sup>3</sup>Durban University of Technology, [mdletyez@iie.ac.za](mailto:mdletyez@iie.ac.za) | <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9645-6226>

it should be applied when students transition into the workplace. This gap frequently presents challenges in preparing graduates for their professional roles. Therefore, this study focuses on understanding how Language Practice graduates apply the communication skills they acquired in the classroom to their workplace contexts, using the Situated Learning Theory (SLT) framework as posited by Khan and Khanam (2023). SLT is an instructional methodology that unpacks students' participation in real life experiences as acquired theoretically in the classroom. Thus, it is crucial, then, to assess the relevance of the communication module, General Language Dynamics (GLDY) 101-103, taught in the Language Practice (LP) programme at Durban University of Technology (DUT), in equipping graduates with the necessary skills to communicate effectively in their professional environments.

Communication studies are designed to equip students with the skills needed to address challenges that may arise in workplace communication contexts. Ideally, these studies aim to create communication experiences that closely resemble those found in professional settings. Pereira *et al.* (2019) argue that many countries are experiencing gaps between the skills required in the workplace and those taught to students, a concern that has attracted significant attention from researchers. Additionally, studies indicate that workplace communication practices do not always align with the communication skills learned in the classroom (Besar, 2018). Marra (2008) notes that textbooks used in communication studies often fail to address some of the complex contexts in which communication occurs and do not accurately reflect the multifaceted nature of workplace interactions. Similarly, Shalem and Ramsarup (2020) conducted a theoretical explorative study examining the types of content that can be studied in the classroom versus those best learned in the workplace. Their multi-layered analysis also discusses the concept of "the knowledge view," which emphasises the value of various bodies of knowledge in preparing students for professional environments. The knowledge that students are exposed to should enable them to effectively apply practical skills in the workplace based on the theoretical foundations acquired in the classroom. However, challenges arise when university communication curricula oversimplify the complexities of real-world workplace communication.

Miranda *et al.* (2021) suggest that communication modules taught in higher education institutions should equip students with employability skills essential for the workplace. However, this does not always seem to be the case. Makhathini (2016) argues that communication skills are often identified as a deficit in education surveys. Consequently, concerns persist that university graduates may lack the necessary skills (Succi and Canovi, 2020) and knowledge to communicate effectively in organisational settings. The gap between school-based knowledge and its applicability in the workplace hinders students' adequate preparation for professional communication. This is particularly concerning because organizations rely on collaboration through communication, which, when practiced effectively, positively impacts overall organisational performance. It is therefore crucial to assess whether the communication module GLDY 101-103 – offered in the Language Practice (LP) programme – adequately prepares students for workplace communication demands. Unlike other communication modules, GLDY delves into the complexities of everyday language use and communication across various contexts. In their first year, students are introduced to foundational communication concepts, including listening skills, verbal and non-verbal communication, communication channels, and the role of language in organizational and general communication. At the second level, students engage with the philosophies of effective language communication, language application in different contexts, general language practices, media and management styles, technical and organisational language, and writing for various professional settings. By the third level, students focus on workplace communication, advanced written and verbal communication, discourse analysis, electronic data-gathering methods, and research skills, including library and information literacy.

This structured progression is designed to provide students with a strong linguistic and communicative foundation, ensuring they can effectively apply their knowledge in diverse workplace settings. However, it remains essential to assess whether this module sufficiently bridges the gap between academic learning and the practical communication skills required in professional environments. Given the varied and comprehensive content of the GLDY module, it is essential to investigate whether it adequately prepares students for communication in different organizational contexts. Bremer (2010) argues that the diverse linguistic demands of the workplace are not sufficiently addressed in classroom learning. Similarly, Filliettaz (2012: 315) states that "the social visibility of language seems to be limited to the classroom context and remains external to the workplace context". These assertions highlight the disconnect between what is taught in academic settings and how communication is applied in professional environments. Furthermore, Filliettaz (2012) contends that learning to work and becoming a member of a profession depend on the discourse and social situations individuals encounter. This implies that it is

difficult to teach workplace-relevant communication skills without exposing students to real working environments. In line with this perspective, Geertshuis *et al.* (2022) emphasise that academics with industry experience are better positioned to teach relevant communication skills, as they understand workplace expectations and challenges. In this context, communication programmes in higher education institutions should produce graduates who possess communication competencies that align with workplace requirements.

However, in the South African workplace, employers often invest substantial resources in workshops and training programmes to enhance employees' communication skills (Makhathini, 2016). This is because poor communication consistently ranks among the top skills requiring improvement in the workplace. The persistent need for such training suggests that communication skills acquired in higher education may not sufficiently prepare students for professional settings. As Barkhuizen (2013) notes, the relevance of South African university curricula must be continuously assessed to ensure alignment with workplace demands. Given these concerns, there is a strong likelihood that Language Practice (LP) graduates enter the workforce as language practitioners without having fully developed the communication skills necessary for organisational success. This underscores the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of communication curricula to bridge the gap between academic instruction and workplace realities. For example, Besar (2018: 54) states that "students who are taught by the process of acquisition rather than participation will not be able to access a body of knowledge that would otherwise be available to them through a learning experience enriched by real world social and material interactions". The implication is that students lack sufficient exposure to real working environments, yet they are expected to demonstrate expertise as employees in those contexts. However, the current study identifies a gap in the literature, as most research focuses on communication practices learned in the workplace as a means to upskill or reskill employees. For instance, a study by Coffelt and Smith (2020) examines unacceptable workplace communication practices from managers' perspectives. Their findings suggest that numerous studies have been conducted on the communication skills expected from recent graduates. Despite this, the present study highlights that little research has been done to assess students' preparedness for the complex communication demands of the workplace. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct research that examines the communication practices acquired at the university level alongside the communication skills required by employers. This study specifically focuses on communication graduates, as they are expected to have developed the competencies necessary to succeed as communication practitioners.

### **Situated Learning Theory**

Given the focus of this study, the chosen analytical lens is the Situated Learning Theory (SLT). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), SLT is concerned with how knowledge is acquired in learning contexts and how it is practiced in authentic settings. Orgill (2007) states that proponents of SLT emphasise that learning is influenced by the context in which it occurs, suggesting that a decontextualised approach to learning is unlikely to be effective. As Orgill (2007: 187) explains, knowledge gained through learning does not exist "as a separate entity in the mind of an individual, but... is generated as an individual interacts with his or her environment (context) to achieve a goal". Scholars such as Yoo and Salisbury-Glennon (2024: 1) define SLT as an "enculturation process" in which individuals assimilate and adapt to the ways of living and doing within a particular society. This process is not a one-time learning experience; rather, SLT assumes that learning is a continuous process that should take place in an authentic context, where communicative relationships between individuals lead to knowledge creation (Orgill, 2007). Therefore, SLT is neither individually focused nor based on cognitive and behaviourist theories, which are common in traditional teaching and learning approaches (Farnsworth *et al.*, 2016). In this regard, Yoo and Salisbury-Glennon (2024) argue that SLT is concerned with people's learning experiences and the application of acquired knowledge in real-life situations. One of the major challenges in teaching and learning is ensuring the relevance of classroom-acquired knowledge in workplace practice. Khan and Khanam (2023) describe this as a disconnect in university teaching and learning, where the realms of "knowing" and "doing" are not adequately integrated. They emphasise that practical application should be guided by those with real-world experience. This aligns with Lave and Wenger's (1991) argument that communicative relationships between newcomers and experienced practitioners are essential, as learning is an ongoing process that thrives through mentorship, support, and collaborative development. Given that this study focuses on the applicability of communication skills learned in the classroom to the workplace, SLT serves as a relevant analytical lens for examining the collected data.

## Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, which allows for an in-depth investigation of participants' experiences and events in a chronological manner (van Rensburg *et al.*, 2010). Qualitative researchers argue that society is constructed through its values, beliefs, and assumptions (Waller *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, the selection of a qualitative research design provided the necessary tools to understand the nature, dynamics, and subjective perceptions of communication within the workplace. Since it was not feasible to include every individual in the study, specific criteria were applied in participant selection. From the large population of eThekweni Metro District, LP graduates working in the workplace were targeted because their attributes aligned with the study's aims, objectives, and purpose. Given the impracticality of including all LP graduates, a sampling process was undertaken to select participants who were both willing and available to contribute to the study. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants. According to Ahmad and Wilkins (2024), purposive sampling – also known as judgmental sampling – is a method that deliberately selects subjects based on specific characteristics and attributes relevant to the study. This approach allowed the researchers to purposefully select and interview twelve participants, including eleven LP graduates working in the eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality and one GLDY lecturer from the Department of Media, Language, and Communication at DUT. Dworkin (2012) affirms that qualitative studies typically require a sample size between five and fifty participants. Thus, the selection of twelve participants was deemed sufficient to elicit the necessary information while ensuring effective data management.

The inclusion of one GLDY lecturer was justified by her extensive experience, having taught the subject for over three years. Additionally, as a former GLDY student, she possessed firsthand knowledge of the course, providing an in-depth understanding of both academic and workplace communication contexts. Other lecturers who had not studied GLDY were excluded from participation, as they would not have been able to adequately respond to the questions in the interview guide. Furthermore, the selected lecturer's expertise in teaching GLDY 101, 102, and 103 demonstrated her familiarity with different levels of the module, reinforcing her suitability for the study. Lecturers teaching other modules within the same program were excluded because their expertise did not align with the study's objectives. By focusing on a participant with direct experience in both academic and workplace communication, the study ensured that the insights gathered were relevant and contributed meaningfully to the research findings. The inclusion criteria for participants required individuals who had completed and passed GLDY 101, 102, and 103 while studying towards their National Diplomas from the first to the third year at DUT. Participants who were still pursuing their diplomas at the time of the study were excluded, as they had not yet qualified and lacked the necessary workplace experience relevant to the study's focus on workplace communication contexts. Additionally, graduates from other universities with similar qualifications were not included, as the study specifically examined graduates from a single institution. Including participants from different universities would have introduced variations in curriculum and training that were beyond the scope of this research.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, which combined both standard and open-ended questions. According to Naz (2022), semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility, enabling both the researcher and participants to express themselves fully while maintaining a structured approach to data collection. This interview format also allows researchers to ask probing questions based on participants' responses, ensuring a deeper exploration of the subject matter. One-on-one interviews were conducted with both newly employed and experienced LP graduates, lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. At the start of each interview, the researcher provided a brief explanation of the types of questions to expect, followed by a few general questions as a warm-up before moving into the main discussion. The semi-structured format allowed researchers to prepare guiding questions in advance while also adapting the interview process based on participants' responses. The questions aimed to gather insights into participants' experiences, opinions, challenges, perceptions, and expectations regarding workplace communication contexts. Participants included employees working in various organisations within Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, such as local courts under the eThekweni Metro District, retail stores, a primary school, a cinema, call centres, a media house, and a higher education institution. In addition, a GLDY lecturer who had taught GLDY 101-103 was also interviewed using a semi-structured approach.

To analyse the data, the study employed thematic analysis. According to Naeem *et al.* (2023), thematic analysis involves a systematic process of familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, refining themes, and presenting findings in a structured research report. The first step in this study's analysis involved transcribing the interview data, which facilitated an initial understanding of the information collected. The next step involved identifying recurring keywords in the transcripts, which were then coded into meaningful



categories. These coded segments were grouped into themes; for instance, responses containing terms related to 'relationships in the workplace' were categorised under a theme examining how communication impacts workplace relationships. Once the themes were established, they were refined and aligned with the study's objectives, ensuring that the qualitative nature of the research was maintained. Given that this study was qualitative, findings were presented in words rather than numerical data or statistical calculations. The final stage involved interpreting the data by integrating it with existing literature to provide a comprehensive analysis of how workplace communication skills are developed through university training and applied in professional settings. Ethical approval was obtained from the DUT Research Ethics Committee before the interviews were conducted. The aim and objectives of the study were clearly explained to the participants, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. All participants willingly provided informed consent to take part in the study.

## Findings and Discussion

To ensure anonymity, interviewees were assigned codes. For example, the first interviewee was labelled "E1" (Employee 1), the second as "E2" (Employee 2), and so on, up to the last employee. The GLDY lecturer, being an employee, was referred to as "E12." The study participants, both male and female, were aged between 25 and 35 and employed in various organizations within the eThekweni Municipality, Durban. With work experience ranging from one to seven years, their responses shaped the key themes discussed in the findings.

### ***Transition between the classroom and the workplace communication contexts***

The classroom and workplace are distinct environments shaped by different values, protocols, and goals. Context is crucial in communication language use and teaching and learning and this has been acknowledged by theorists of SLT that all knowledge is contextually situated (Sathe *et al.* (2021). Regarding this, Kern *et al.* (2015) assert that language shapes context, but context also shapes language, which applies to communication learned in the classroom and used in the workplace. Most participants noted similarities and differences between these settings. Concerning this, E10 stated that:

*It (GLDY) provided me with various ways of communicating since communicating in the classroom and the workplace is different. When I started working, I realised that the language I use to communicate with the customers is different from how we were taught in the classroom. I assumed I had to use formal language when communicating with my customers, but I actually use informal language. I also have to adapt to their communicating styles.*

This highlights that while the environment in which individuals communicate may be the same, the situations may differ, requiring different communication styles to meet the prevailing needs. Communication styles may change to accommodate individuals who are not experts in a particular field. The findings show that students believe workplace communication should be strictly formal. One participant had to adjust this mindset to meet her customers' communication needs, suggesting a lack of comprehension of the GLDY module's diverse communication contexts. Bremer (2010) supports this, noting that gaps between study and pedagogy can lead to challenges for students. Many participants emphasised the need to apply classroom learning to workplace situations. Workplace, in this case, refers to authentic context or real-work environment or setting (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in which the applicability of what the participants have learnt have to take place. SLT argues that knowledge and skills that relate to one's academic interests should be enhanced through participation in authentic contexts in which they are used (Sathe *et al.*, 2021). Parreti (2008: 491) suggests that collaboration between lecturers and students around communication tasks helps develop transferable communication skills, as evidenced by E4's assertion. Communication is highly demanded as a transferable skill in the workplace (Setyorini *et al.*, 2022). However, this transition is not as easy as it sounds. Regarding this, participant E4 remarked:

*Transitioning from the classroom to the workplace was not an easy journey because I had to adapt to the working environment, relying in some instances on some of the techniques I learned in the classroom.*

The transition for participant E4 may have been challenging because the situations they encountered did not facilitate the transfer of classroom learning to workplace contexts. SLT emphasises the importance of a connection between skills acquired in the classroom and their application in real-world workplace settings (Yoo and Salisbury-Glennon, 2024). This perspective suggests that a decontextualised approach to learning is unlikely to be effective

(Orgill, 2007). Therefore, when there is a disconnect between classroom-based skills and workplace demands, students may struggle to effectively apply their knowledge in professional settings. Moreover, Shalem and Ramsarup (2020) support E4's response, noting that knowledge gained in higher education or vocational institutions often does not reflect real-world occurrences in the workplace. This distinction can hinder students from quickly understanding workplace expectations due to unfamiliar communication settings they have not yet experienced. Similarly, E2 noted that the classroom teaches theory and simulated scenarios, while the workplace teaches practical application. Participant E2 adds:

*In the classroom you are not taught specific situations, but we were given scenarios which may or may not apply to everyone else's workplace environment. In the workplace, you are dealing with specific situations that require you to use the background knowledge (what you learnt) to complete them. The only difference is that in the classroom you are given a generalised view of the communication situation, and in the workplace, you get first-hand experience of a specified situation. In the classroom, they will only tell you of the communication practices.*

Participant E2 further stated that "most of the scenarios used to teach are far from the contexts found in the workplace. Hence, transitioning from the classroom as a graduate to the workplace was not easy for most people". The participants' experiences highlight a challenge in applying knowledge to real-world settings or authentic contexts. Khan and Khanam (2023) describe this as a disconnect in university teaching and learning, where the realms of 'knowing' and 'doing' are inadequately integrated. Yoo and Salisbury (2024) emphasise the relevance of SLT, pointing to the lack of an enculturation process that enables individuals to assimilate and adapt to the practices of their workplace. Since enculturation is an ongoing process, participants would benefit from learning in real-life situations alongside experienced colleagues. E2's concern about classroom scenarios not aligning with workplace realities underscores this issue, suggesting that students may misinterpret scenarios due to the absence of the enculturation process advocated by SLT. Additionally, participants noted that workplace realities often differ from what they were taught, consistent with Read and Michaud's (2015) finding that classroom learning does not easily translate to the workplace. This is largely because workplace learning focuses on reskilling or upskilling employees, while university education is more general. For instance, E7 stated:

*GLDY does not equip one effectively in terms of impromptu presentations; in the workplace a great many unprepared presentations take place. What helped is that I studied Public Speaking, where we were taught basic presentation skills.*

The issue of the classroom being decontextualised and the workplace being contextualised raises concerns about transitioning knowledge from the classroom to the workplace. Regarding this, Khan and Khanam (2023) discuss Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning model that scrutinises traditional university teaching methods that do not advocate for participation in a community of practice. When graduates are exposed to that kind teaching, they may face challenges as new employees and may require retraining, despite completing communication-related courses at university. This was evident when E5 stated:

*The workplace is a very complex environment. Being a graduate, I expected to have it easy, only to find out that, even though I am qualified, in the workplace, you learn something new every day.*

The assertion above highlights that scenarios created for educational purposes may be irrelevant to the workplace or that students struggle to apply them in real-world settings. This is evident in the belief of some students that a qualification guarantees an easy transition into the workplace, which may point to a lack of application of what was learned in the GLDY module. As a result, graduates face significant challenges when entering the workplace.

E5's later responses seem to contradict earlier ones; for instance, communication challenges were addressed by applying classroom lessons. E5 stated that "communication issues are resolved by communicating," suggesting that talking about challenges is the best way to resolve them. This highlights the importance of addressing challenges verbally, as silence, as E9 mentioned, "is another form of communicating". A communication background enables effective expression of feelings or grievances, promoting honesty and transparency among employees. E5 was able to overcome communication barriers using techniques learned in GLDY.

However, the inadequacy of communication modules in universities was acknowledged by the GLDY lecturer (E12), who noted that communication is not emphasised enough, leaving graduates unaware of its importance in

the workplace. This gap leads to communication challenges in organizations due to a lack of basic communication skills. E12 also pointed out that many lecturers lack industry experience, meaning their teaching on workplace communication is often based on assumption. This aligns with E2's view that classroom scenarios do not always match the workplace, a sentiment supported by Geertshuis *et al.* (2022), whose study found that lecturers with industry experience were more adept at imparting relevant skills.

### ***Dynamic relationships in the workplace***

Participants in this study extensively discussed the relationships they have in the workplace and how these interactions influenced their ability to communicate effectively. They shared their experiences with superiors, colleagues, and clients, and how these relationships impacted their communication. Cheng *et al.* (2019) suggest that factors like the "interpersonal aspect of workplace interaction" can negatively affect communication and may lead to financial losses if not addressed. Interpersonal skills, which refer to the ability to interact with others, are key to successful communication. Effective communication depends not only on fluency but also on personal attributes and behaviours, which help build and sustain long-lasting relationships and contribute to a healthy work environment. Regarding this, participant E2 then stated:

*In the workplace, you will have a boss, and if there are any issues you are facing or questions that you want to ask, you need to be in the know of the specific organisation's proper channels of voicing out those opinions. When you come into the workplace environment, you will encounter people with different personalities. Some bosses would deliberately ignore their own channels (company's channels) and that might confuse you because you were taught that when you know the proper channels everything will be fine.*

Participant E2's statement about employees not following proper communication channels reflects a lack of consideration for communication, rather than the employers' personalities. Venz and Shoshan (2022) found that employees often withhold knowledge, leading to underperformance. When employers neglect communication channels, employees may lack the motivation to communicate effectively, which can hinder organisational functioning. Additionally, Pazcoguin (2013) suggests that conflicts arise when values and practices between subordinates and superiors clash, as E2 experienced in his organisation. Consequently, communication graduates might ignore the theoretical aspects of interpersonal communication learned in class to better fit in at work. Regarding this, Yoo and Salisbury-Glennon (2024) emphasise the importance of SLT as they refer to it as a process of "enculturation" that places students in contexts that will allow them to adapt easily and blend in seamlessly when they enter the workplace. It thus requires graduates who are confident in themselves and their abilities to build healthy relationships with their colleagues and superiors. For instance, some participants noted that they go extra lengths to build healthy relationships amongst themselves and individuals they interact with in the workplace and participant E11 said:

*As a call centre agent, I remember when I used to call Whites using my normal accent. They would always drop my calls. So, I had to change the way I sounded and block my nose so that I may sound White and twang. I also had to use a false name so that they thought I was a White lady, so I could boost sales.*

As E11 narrated, she had to adopt an identity that wasn't hers to effectively communicate with clients. Without doing so, she wouldn't have been able to attract or form a relationship with the targeted client. Stepping outside her comfort zone helped her gain the client's trust, which is essential in any relationship. This is particularly relevant in South African society, where workplace diversity often creates significant gaps in interpersonal relationships and communication. In this regard, Yoo and Salisbury-Glennon (2024) assert that SLT's emphasis on the sociocultural perspective, which includes social interaction that enhances one's mental capabilities and social capital, is crucial in learning. This aligns with the proponents of SLT (Lave and Wenger, 1991), who state that communicative relationships between newcomers and experienced practitioners are essential. In the context of this study, this refers to the communicative relationships between new employees and their colleagues and superiors. Learning is an ongoing process that requires mentorship, support, and collaboration. Therefore, the GLDY modules are designed to prepare students to communicate with various individuals, including colleagues, superiors, stakeholders, and the community. Regarding this E1 had this to say:

*GLDY taught me how to communicate with different people such as my colleagues in the workplace and the community at large. My work was mostly about communicating and translating, so, GLDY played a huge role in delivering that.*

E1 acknowledges the role GLDY played in communication acquisition, as it equipped her not only to communicate with immediate colleagues but also with everyone encountered in the workplace. Similarly, E8 mentioned that her workplace was highly diverse, with cultural differences among herself, her colleagues, and clients. However, E8 stated:

*Diversity in my workplace strengthens the relationship between my superiors, clients, and myself because some of my superiors ensure I understand what needs to be done in the courtroom in the way they communicate about job activities with me.*

Participant E8 highlighted that cultural diversity in their workplace positively influenced relationships with colleagues, employers, and clients. While cultural differences could lead to conflicts for some, E3 noted her workplace is highly diverse, with Indian South Africans being the dominant group. However, she mentioned that cultural barriers sometimes caused conflicts, straining relationships among colleagues. To deal with these communication and cultural barriers, E3 sectioned her audiences based on the kind of a relationship she has with colleagues with whom she interacts and then stated that:

*I also used different communication channels with different people. I spoke to some people on one-on-one basis and had an open discussion, but with others, in most cases, I felt more comfortable if we were messaging or emailing each other. This allowed me to be free to communicate with everyone.*

On the other hand, diversity in E3's workplace negatively impacted her environment, though it did not prevent her from interacting with colleagues. She understood the nature of these relationships and wisely chose different communication genres when engaging with them individually. Additionally, some workplaces are so diverse that employees interact with people from other countries and continents. E9 and E11 mentioned interacting with clients from the USA, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and other African countries. To address the diversity brought about by globalisation, communication must be used to bridge gaps between nationals and cultures. In globalised environments, multiculturalism is inevitable, and technology, such as online translation tools, helps manage linguistic diversity. Furthermore, to meet globalisation demands, it's crucial to enhance the genres learned in the classroom to equip students with effective communication tools for building healthier, lasting workplace relationships.

### ***Influence of technology on communication dynamics in the workplace***

Workplace communication is gradually evolving due to various factors. According to Kong (2014) and Lam, Cheng and Kong (2014), diversity and changes in discourse are influenced by external elements such as technological advancements, globalisation, intercultural influences, multilingualism, and the rise of small and home offices. Data analysis indicates that these factors significantly impact workplace communication and highlight the role of GLDY in acquiring and applying effective workplace communication practices. This underscores the need, as emphasised by SLT, to teach students by exposing them to real-life situations (authentic contexts) (Bhebhe, 2022), particularly those shaped by technology and diverse workplace environments. Such exposure is crucial when studying the influence of technology on workplace communication, given the increasingly technologically mediated nature of organisational communication today.

Most participants mentioned using telephones, a communication tool studied in the classroom. They also recalled studying reports and memoranda, though memoranda are less common in the workplace. This shift is due to the adoption of technology, particularly email, which has replaced memoranda for internal communication. Email, with its time and date stamps, helps track and trace messages. Whether synchronous or asynchronous, email allows for feedback, a key aspect of interpersonal communication, marking a transformation in workplace communication. Regarding using email as means of communicating in the workplace E3 stated:

*I also used different communication channels with different people. I spoke to some people on one-on-one basis and had an open discussion, but with others, in most cases, I felt more comfortable if we were messaging or emailing each other. This allowed me to be free to communicate with everyone.*



The data shows that E3 first understood her relationships with diverse colleagues, which influenced the communication genres she used. If E3 is uncomfortable speaking face-to-face with a coworker, she can choose alternatives such as texting or email. Although she does not have close relationships with all colleagues, this does not prevent her from interacting with them. However, without technology, communication with some colleagues could be challenging. Technology offers a safe space for employees to engage and collaborate with others they might avoid face-to-face and helps build workplace relationships. This finding is consistent with the study by Bell *et al.* (2013), whose participants collaborated and engaged using technology, and which used SLT as an analytical lens. Collaboration is one of the ongoing learning processes emphasised by Lave and Wenger (1991). Thus, communication studies should teach students various report-writing styles, including electronic formats, as some technologically advanced organisations may require electronic reporting instead of traditional methods. E5 recognises the impact of technologically mediated writing in securing himself employment and stated:

*Basic communication skills are covered in GLDY, such as how to write an email, a letter, a memo, and other communication genres. Applying writing techniques learned in GLDY, alone helped me secure myself employment because I had to write an essay and send it through email for me to be even considered for the post. Working in an environment that uses emails for paper trails, phone calls, reports, and diaries, having learned techniques of the above communication genres helped a lot.*

Social media and social network content are not currently studied in the GLDY module. Therefore, it is crucial to introduce them into communication modules. Including social media in the GLDY program would better familiarise students with its use in the workplace. While writing skills learned in communication studies help with writing across various genres and platforms, including social media, the shift of media houses and publishing companies to online publications (newspapers, magazines, journals, books) means students must be equipped with the appropriate genres they will use in their future careers.

### Implications of the Study

This study provides evidence that participants benefit from opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and superiors as they integrate educational knowledge to enhance their communicative relationships in the workplace. Our findings have practical implications for the design and delivery of general communication modules aimed at improving employees' communication skills. Specifically, the study highlights the need for programmes that are purposefully structured to align with workplace requirements. One approach is to employ lecturers with experience outside academia (Geertshuis *et al.*, 2022), ensuring that course content reflects diverse organisational contexts. While some participants found classroom-based communication knowledge applicable to workplace settings, others expressed the need for module revisions to create stronger links between academia and professional practice. This could involve exposing students to real-world workplace communication situations, aligning with SLT's emphasis on enculturation. In this context, university education should function as a bridge between academic learning and employment by equipping graduates with the skills demanded by the workforce (Shalem and Ramsarup, 2020). By immersing learners in authentic professional settings, this approach helps close the gap between theoretical instruction and practical application.

According to Bell *et al.* (2013), SLT "predicts that learning is most effective when it is situated both within supportive social and authentic contexts." The findings of this study reveal multiple opportunities for social interaction and contextual learning that extend beyond formal classroom instruction. In other words, SLT acknowledges the dynamic relationship between the workplace environment, the participants, and their continuous learning process, reinforcing the idea that professional competence is best developed through meaningful engagement in real-world contexts. To address the challenges, formal internships or work placements should be incorporated to complement the course's theoretical base and for students to engage with authentic context of the workplace. This would provide students with workplace experience and offer lecturers insights on improving the GLDY communication module. Programmes focusing on communication should prioritise ongoing industry engagement through workshops, seminars, or webinars. Industry professionals should be invited to share their real-world insights, helping to bridge the gap between academia and industry.

Although not explicitly examined in this study, some participants' responses suggested that modern communication platforms could enhance job performance in the workplace. Therefore, it is recommended that GLDY course content include training on communication tools such as Zoom, MS Teams, and Skype, focusing on their work-

related functions. These platforms are mobile and integrate many functions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to the rise of small and home offices. Students need to become familiar with these tools to better manage multi-dimensional workplace communication and tasks. These tools will enhance students' workplace communicative competence, collaborative mindset, socialisation, and problem-solving skills (Chen, 2021). Participants in this study were from one university of technology (UoT), where curriculum adjustments are ongoing to ensure graduates remain relevant in the workplace. We relied on self-reported accounts rather than observing participants' actual workplace experiences, which is a limitation. However, we believe this does not hinder the generalisability of the findings, as they align with existing literature. This study focused on participants in the eThekweni Municipality, Durban. Although graduates from DUT working across the country could have participated, financial, time, and distance constraints prevented their involvement. While this is a limitation, it does not affect the findings' generalisation, as the results align with the reviewed literature.

## Conclusion

Although most participants said the GLDY module prepared them for workplace communication, some found the workplace contexts to be antithetical to what they learned in the classroom. The data clearly indicates a need for the genres taught in the GLDY module to reflect workplace situations. As highlighted by the interviewed lecturer, this issue could be addressed by engaging lecturers with industry experience, as they understand workplace communication requirements. As the findings show, workplace contexts require graduates to adapt what they learned in class. This should be emphasised in communication skills training to help students effectively use appropriate genres and registers in the workplace. Finally, the data underscores the need for ongoing collaboration with industry stakeholders to ensure communication module content adequately prepares students for their roles in the workplace. For future research, we suggest combining interview studies with workplace observations to strengthen the trustworthiness and practical applicability of these findings. Developing interview guides aligned with relevant theories, such as activity theory, will also provide clearer focus for future studies.

## Declarations

**Interdisciplinary Scope:** The article demonstrates an interdisciplinary scope by integrating insights from organisational communication, language studies, organisational behaviour, and education.

**Author Contributions:** All authors contributed equally to writing all sections of the article; however, the article is based on the first author's master's thesis. The authors declare this article is their original work and all the materials used are appropriately acknowledged and explicitly referenced.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Funding:** The authors received no financial support for the publication.

## References

- Ahmad, M. and Wilkins, S. 2024. Purposive Sampling in Qualitative Research: A Framework for the Entire Journey. *International Journal of Methodology*, 1(1): 1-19.
- Barkhuizen, N. 2013. *Filling the Knowledge Gap: How Relevant Are University Programmes to Industry Needs?* Master's Dissertation, North-West University.
- Bell, R. L., Maeng, J. L. and Binns, I. C. 2013. Learning in Context: Technology Integration in a Teacher Preparation Programme Informed by Situated Learning Theory. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 50(3): 348-379.
- Besar, S. N. P. H. 2018. Situated Learning Theory: The Key to Effective Classroom Teaching? *HONAI: International Journal for Educational, Social, Political and Cultural Studies*, 1(1): 49-60.
- Bhebhe, S. 2022. Mentoring Pre-Service Teachers in Situated Learning: A Case Study of Zimbabwean Teacher Training College. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 14(2): 550-558.
- Bremer, S. 2010. Collaborative Writing: Bridging the Gap between the Textbooks and the Workplace. *English For Specific Purposes*, 29(1): 121-132.

- Campbell, S., Campbell-Phillips, S. and Phillips, D. 2020. Lack of Communication between Management and Employees. *Journal of Religion, Social, Cultural, and Political Science*, 4(3): 32-39.
- Chen, R. H. 2021. Fostering Students' Workplace Communicative Competence and Collaborative Mindset through an Inquiry-Based Learning Design. *Education Science*, 11(17): 1-13.
- Cheng, W., Lam, P. W. Y. and Kong, K. C. C. 2019. Learning English through Workplace Communication: Linguistic Devices for Interpersonal Meaning in Textbooks in Hong Kong. *English for Specific Purposes*, 55(29): 28-39.
- Coffelt, T. and Smith, L. M. 2020. Exemplary and Unacceptable Workplace Communication Skills. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 83(4): 1-30.
- Dworkin, S. R. 2012. Sample Size Policy for Qualitative Studies Using In-Depth Interviews. *Arch Sex Behaviour*, 4(1): 1319-1320.
- Farnsworth, V., Kleanthous, I. and Wenger-Trayner, E. 2016. Communities of Practice as a Social Theory of Learning: A Conversation with Etienne Wenger. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 64(2): 139-160.
- Filliettaz, L. 2012. The Linguistic Demands of Workplace Learning: Power and Miscommunication in Vocational Interactions. In: Bär, M., Bonnet, A., Decke-Cornill, A., Grünwald, A. and Hu, A. eds. *Globalisierung, A. Migration Und Fremdsprachenunterricht*. Hamburg: Schneider Verlag Hoengehren, 315-326.
- Geertshuis, S., Liu, Q., Lewis, N. and Cui, J. 2022. Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Challenge of Preparing Graduates for their Futures., *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 1(1):1-15.
- Hargie, O. 2016. The Importance of Communication for Organisational Effectiveness. *Psicologia Do Trabalho E das Organizações*, 15-32.
- Kern, F., Lingnau, B. and Paul, I. 2015. The Construction of "Academic Language" in German Classrooms: Communicative Practices and Linguistic Norms in Morning Circles. *Linguistics and Education*, 31(1): 207-220.
- Khan, B. S. and Khanam, A. 2023. Developing a Situated Learning Model in Local Context for Carrying Community Projects by Preservice Teachers: An Experimental Inquiry. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 43(3): 389-398.
- Kong, K. 2014. *Professional Discourse*. United Kingdom, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lam, P. W. Y., Cheng, W. and Kong, K. C. C. 2014. Learning English through Workplace Communication: An Evaluation of Existing Resources in Hong Kong. *English for Specific Purposes*, 34: 68-78.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Le Roux, T. 2010. The Contribution of South African Corporate Communication Practitioners to Organisational Performance. Master's Dissertation, North-West University.
- Makhathini, T. P. 2016. Work Integrated Learning Competencies: Industrial Supervisors' Perspectives. *Perspectives in Education*, 34(3): 56-71.
- Marra, M. 2008. Meeting Talk: Aligning the Classroom with the Workplace. *Communication Journal*, 9(1): 63-82.
- Miranda, J., Navarrete, C., Noguez, J., Molina-Espinosa, J. M., Ramírez-Montoya, M. S., Navarro-Tuch, S. A., Bustamante-Bello, M. R., Rosas-Fernández, J. B. and Molina, A. 2021. The Core Components of Education 4.0 in Higher Education: Three Case Studies in Engineering Education. *Computers and Electrical Engineering*, 93(1): 107-278.
- Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K. and Ranfagni, S. 2023. A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22(1): 1-18.
- Naz, N., Gulab, F. and Aslam, N. 2022. Development of Qualitative Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Case Study Research. *Competitive Social Sciences Research Journal (CSSRJ)*, 3(2): 42-52.
- Orgill, M. 2007. Situated Cognition. In: Bodner, G. M. and Orgill, M. eds. *Theoretical Frameworks for Research in Chemistry/Science Education*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 187-203.

- Parreti, M. C. 2008. Teaching Communication in Capstone Design: The Role of the Instructor in Situated Learning. *Journal of the Engineering Education*, 97(4): 491-503.
- Pazcoguin, D. J. M. 2013. The Effects of Miscommunication between Supervising Officers and Supervised Employees on Company Attrition and Employee Resignation. *International Journal of Science and Research*, 2(1): 1-10.
- Pereira, E. T., Vilas-Boas, and Rebelo, C. C. 2019. Graduates' Skills and Employability: The View of Students from Different European Countries. *Higher Education and Work-Based Learning*, 9(4): 758-774.
- Plebe, A. and De La Cruze, V. M. 2015. When Language Shapes Perspective. *Rivista Italiana Di Filosofia Gel Linguaggio*, 1(2): 42-57.
- Read, S. and Michaud, M. 2015. Writing about Writing and Multi-Major Professional Writing Course. *College Composition and Communication*, 66(3): 427-457.
- Sathe, L. A., Zakrzewski, T. C., Romano, A., Longmore, A. L. and Kramlich, D. J. 2021. Transformative Listening across Global Contexts: Situated Learning Theory and the Use of a Listening Protocol to Create Safe Spaces for Listening and Connection. Available: <https://stkate.elsevierpure.com/en/publications/transformative-listening-across-global-contexts-situated-learning> (Accessed 27 May 2023).
- Setyorini, N., Shabrie, W. S. and Faisal, M. 2022. Transferrable Skills for Employment Development in Indonesia. *Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Business and Social Sciences (ICOBUSS)*, 1(2): 1343-1352.
- Succi, C. and Canovi, M. 2020. Soft Skills to Enhance Graduate Employability: Comparing Students and Employers' Perceptions. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(9): 1834-1847.
- Van Rensburg, G. H., Alpaslan, A. H., Du Plooy, G. M., Gelderbom, D., Van Eeden, R. and Wigston, D. J. 2010. Study Guide 2010. Available: [https://gimmenotes.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/101\\_2018\\_3\\_b-106.pdf](https://gimmenotes.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/101_2018_3_b-106.pdf) (Accessed 28 June 2022).
- Venz, L. and Shoshan, H. N. 2022. Be Smart, Play Dumb? A Transactional Perspective on Day-Specific Knowledge Hiding, Interpersonal Conflict, and Psychological Strain. *Human Relations*, 75(1): 113-138.
- Waller, V., Farquharson, K. and Dempsey, D. 2016. *Qualitative Social Research: Contemporary Methods for the Digital Age*. London: Sage.
- Yoo, H. A. and Salisbury- Glennon, J. D. 2024. Applying Situated Learning Theory to Convergence Apparel Design Curricula. Available: <https://www.iastatedigitalpress.com/itaa/article/18619/galley/16545/view/> (Accessed 18 November 2025).