

UiTM Students' Perceptions of Internship Program: Oral Communication Skill at Workplace during COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

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Following years of study at university, students in their final year embark on an internship program to gain experience and to apply their knowledge and skills. When COVID-19 first struck, it changed the education landscape, including the implementation of the internship program. Some students did their internships from home while others participated in hybrid internships which might have impacted their oral communication skills. Therefore, this study aims to determine the student's perceptions of oral communication skills during the internship programs and identify the various oral communication skills required at the workplace during COVID-19. The study employed a mixed-method approach, incorporating both interviews and surveys in collecting the data. The results of this study reveal that students perceived effective oral communication with colleagues as crucial, as poor communication not only affects interactions but also impedes productivity in the workplace. Additionally, interns were anticipated to proficiently engage in numerous professional interactions with colleagues, superiors, and clients, demonstrating practiced and essential oral communication skills in the workplace. Hence, universities should provide courses or activities aimed at fostering skills pertinent to work settings and preparing students for internship programs. The study provides valuable insights into students' perceptions of oral communication skills needed during an internship program and the essential communication skills sought by employers for internship programs.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by comprehensively gathering students' perspectives on the oral communication skills

deemed necessary before entering an internship program as well as the actual communication skills required during internships conducted during the pandemic.

1. Introduction

Internship programs are widely recognised as an effective means of producing high-quality graduates ready for the marketplace. [Abidin et al. \(2017\)](#) believe that it is a duration of a professional learning experience for students to work in a related field of study and offers them the advantage of gaining invaluable knowledge in the field. Additionally, this program allows students to apply theoretical knowledge into practice, develop important soft skills, and establish professional networks. By engaging in real-work experience, students gain a better understanding of the industry and enhance their employability after graduation. Most importantly, the Job Outlook Report by the [National Association of Colleges and Employers \(2018\)](#) emphasizes that internship experience within a specific industry is often viewed as a key factor in gaining employment. Furthermore, the internship will help to establish and strengthen a close relationship between the university and the industry ([Ahmad & Kamarudin, 2023](#)).

Realising the importance of internships as they play a vital role in students' professional and personal development, researchers have increasingly focused on investigating students' and organisation's views on the internship program. [Abidin et al. \(2017\)](#) in their study, have revealed that students perceived the internship program as not only useful but also essential in preparing them for the realities of the working world. The findings also indicated that the internship provided them with valuable exposure to human relations which they felt was essential as it provided them with new knowledge and hands-on experience of what to expect in a real-world situation. Similarly, [Mediawati et al. \(2020\)](#) highlighted that interns' willingness to learn, ability to work together and enthusiasm developed well after participating in the internship program. This underscores the overall positive impact of internship programs on improving essential soft skills and cultivating growth among students.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 has significantly impacted interns, particularly in developing their communication skills. As remote work has become a norm, interns must adjust to virtual communication platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. This transition has presented challenges, as effective communication in a virtual environment requires different skills compared to face-to-face interactions. Without the benefit of non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions, interns had to learn how to articulate their ideas and questions through digital mediums clearly. Moreover, the lack of in-person interactions has made it harder for interns to build rapport and network with colleagues and supervisors. A study by [Teng et al. \(2021\)](#) revealed that interns acknowledged a lack of development in their teamwork, interpersonal, and verbal communication skills while working from home (WFH) during internships. This is supported by [Chow \(2020\)](#) who found that employers highlighted the weaknesses of interns, especially in their quality of work, operation knowledge and communication skills. The motivation for this study was driven back by the lack of focus given to interns' oral communication skills required at the workplace during the COVID-19 era. By analysing the students' perception and the actual oral communication skills needed, this study aims to provide insight into the importance of oral communication skills required during internship and offer recommendations for syllabus makers to

refine and enhance internship offerings, to keep up with the evolving job requirements of different industries.

1.1. Statement of Problem

The university prepares its students for the workplace not only by providing knowledge about their field of study but also by introducing courses that enhance their oral communication skills. However, it has been reported that graduates today possess low to average soft skills and face difficulties in obtaining employment in their fields (Krishnan et al., 2019). There is a preference in the industry for candidates with average grades who can demonstrate strong soft skills which can enhance their performance in their job and help them to work well with others. As part of their graduation requirements, all students are expected to complete an internship program. Therefore, before going for their internship, the students should possess adequate oral communication skills to meet the needs of the industries.

Idrus et al. (2010) revealed in their study that even though the interns possess high oral and written communication skills, the interns' strength lies in writing and listening skills. This shows that there is still room for improvement concerning their oral communication skills. Another study by Mohd Noor and Moey (2022) also indicated that less than half of the respondents possess moderate communication skills. Various factors affect their communication skills including anxiety, lack of confidence, speech impairment and poor language command (Mohd Noor & Moey, 2022). The authors also highlighted poor language command hinders the interns from being effective communicators.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the workplace, leading organisations to remote work arrangements. This has caused several challenges for students who participated in an internship program during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Akhtar and Parkar (2024), communication with supervisors and co-workers has proved to be challenging, leading to potential barriers to learning and self-development. Similar to a study done by Ahmad (2020), interns were noted to experience limitations in communication skills resulting in miscommunication and delayed responses from colleagues and supervisors. This resulted in the task being unable to be completed promptly. Furthermore, they did not like that they were unable to communicate face-to-face with their superiors, which hindered their overall internship experience.

Despite the extensive research on skills necessary for internship programs, there is a noticeable gap in studies focusing specifically on students' perception of the oral communication skills required for internship during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the nature of the workplace shifted to remote and hybrid models, the demand for proficient digital communication skills increased significantly. This shift has highlighted the critical need for effective oral communication in virtual environments, yet there is limited research exploring how students perceive and adapt to these new communication demands during their internships. Understanding students' perceptions on this matter is essential for preparing them to meet workplace expectations effectively. Therefore, the present research aims to address this gap by gathering insights on students' perceptions specifically on the oral communication skills required before joining an internship program and the actual oral communication required for an internship during the pandemic.

1.2. Research Aim and Research Questions

The main objectives of this study are:

- i. To determine the students' perceptions of the oral communication skills required during the internship program.
- ii. To identify the oral communication skills required at the workplace for interns during COVID-19.

This study is done to answer the following questions:

- i. What are the students' perceptions of the oral communication skills required during internship programs?
- ii. What oral communication skills are required at the workplace for interns during COVID-19?

2. Literature Review

Internships are crucial for professional development, providing students with valuable hands-on experience that bridges the gap between academic learning and professional environments. These programs allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings and gain a deeper understanding of their chosen fields. Through internships, students can develop essential professional skills, build industry connections, and strengthen their critical soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities which are vital for a successful transition into the workforce. According to [Calfoforo \(2023\)](#), as part of their professional growth during internships, students are expected to acquire the essential soft skills required to meet employers' demands such as communication skills, interpersonal skills, and financial literacy. Per the Fourth Industrial Revolution, knowledge and skills ranging from digital literacy to soft skills were sought after by employers ([The Star, 2022](#)). [Ab Rahman et al. \(2019\)](#) state that industries are looking for graduates with impressive skills or who meet certain standards set by the company.

Communication skills, in particular, are critical in the workplace during an internship to ensure that interns can perform their tasks efficiently. Employers seek graduates who not only perform well in their studies but also have good communication skills. [Ab Rahman et al. \(2019\)](#) mentioned that communication skills are part of the soft skills that are crucial to an organisation's success. In the same study, the list of communication skills differs from one scholar to another. There are many aspects encompassed in communication skills other than soft skills. For instance, communicating clearly and effectively in both written and oral media is what communication skills entail ([Ab Rahman et al., 2019](#)). Meanwhile, [Coffelt et al. \(2019\)](#) divided communication skills into four categories including written, oral, visual, and electronic. While written communication takes the form of written documents and email serves as a form of electronic communication, the researchers pointed out that oral communication takes the form of how one interacts, presents, and conducts meetings. Demonstrating strong oral communication skills helps interns in facilitating better collaboration with their co-workers. Furthermore, language competency in oral communication skills is salient for them to communicate well with others. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic where remote work has become the norm, the ability to communicate effectively through digital platforms has also become crucial.

Recent research has highlighted the growing concern over skill deficiencies among graduates. A study conducted by [Monogaran and Subramaniam \(2023\)](#) revealed that, based on student and employer perception, there are gaps in skill levels in four areas, 'problem-solving and scientific skills', 'communication, leadership, and team skills', 'practical skills', and 'managerial and entrepreneurial skills'. The study suggests that students and employers perceive a significant gap in skill levels in these crucial areas. This is also similar to [Ab Rahman et al. \(2019\)](#) study which revealed that fresh graduates seem to be lacking in English proficiency. One of the contributing factors is the use of informal language instead of formal language in a formal working setting such as in meetings and presentations. In the context of COVID-19, several studies have emphasised the weaknesses and incompetencies among interns, especially in the quality of work and operation knowledge ([Chow, 2020](#)), teamwork ([Teng et al.,2021](#)), and communication skills ([Chow, 2020](#); [Teng et al.,2021](#); [Ahmad & Kamarudin, 2023](#)).

Most studies related to students' communication skills during internships were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic era ([Ahmad, 2020](#); [Ab Rahman et al., 2019](#); [Mohd Noor & Moey, 2022](#)). Currently, some companies offer their employees the opportunity to work on a rotational basis. As a result, it is crucial to determine how students perceive the oral communication skills they are required to possess when completing their internships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the objective of this study is to examine how students perceive the internship program with a focus on oral communication skills during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method approach in answering two research questions which are; (i) what are the students' perceptions of the oral communication skills required before joining the internship program? and (ii) what oral communication skills are required at the workplace for interns during COVID-19? According to [Wasti, Simkhada, Teijlingen, Sathian, and Banerjee \(2022\)](#), a mixed-method approach is conducted to get a better and deeper understanding of the phenomenon by providing a more comprehensive picture of it. This is because the mixed-method approach incorporates both interviews and surveys to collect the data.

The interview session was conducted with a total of five interns who had completed internships in various organisations in Malaysia. It was conducted in a separate session for each of them in about 20 - 30 minutes. A consent form via a Google Form was also provided before the session, serving as an agreement for participants to be included in the study. The interview sessions were conducted online via an agreed platform between researchers and the respondents - Google Meet and Zoom, and were recorded.

On the other hand, for the surveys, a total of 100 interns participated in completing online surveys. The survey employed in this study was developed based on questionnaires utilised in three previous studies conducted by ([Carol et al., 2011](#); [Chan, 2014](#)). Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the collected survey data. Therefore, this method was relevant in determining the students' perceptions of the internship programs, specifically on the oral communication skills required during the internship programs at the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.2. Sampling Procedures

The purposive sampling technique was used in this study to collect data on the student's perceptions of the internship program, especially on the communication skills required during the internship program at the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several criteria have been set in choosing the participants to be part of the study. To guarantee a thorough investigation of the study, this sampling technique sought to select participants who fulfilled predetermined criteria to answer the research questions about the study (Denieffe, 2020).

3.3. Participants Characteristics

The researchers purposely chose the characteristics of the participants of this study. One criterion was the interns were from this public Malaysian university who did the internship during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021. The participants were also given the freedom to retract the statements during the analysis if they felt that their claims contradicted what they had said. Additionally, they were guaranteed that their remarks would not have an impact on them academically or non-academically, professionally or non-professionally.

3.4. Research Instruments

A semi-structured interview was selected as the data collection method for this study to allow participants to respond more freely to a set of questions prepared by the researchers (George, 2023). This will provide flexibility for the participants to react to the questions asked, allowing them to provide both lengthy explanations and brief as well as accurate replies. The survey encompassed five sections which are (i) Demographic background (gender, the industry in which the participants worked or interned, and the mode of internship; remote or on-site), (ii) Students' perceptions of internship, (iii) Challenges faced by students during the internship, (iv) Reading and writing skills required during the internship, (v) Speaking and listening skills required during the internship. These items were asked to know the students' perceptions of the oral communication skills required during internships as well as the various communication skills required at the workplace for them to complete their internship during COVID-19.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedures

The collected questionnaire data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) with descriptive statistics employed to present the findings of the study. The results were visually illustrated using tables. Meanwhile, the recorded interview sessions were transcribed and systematically reviewed to extract key insights from the study.

4. Results

4.1. What are the students' perceptions of the oral communication skills required during internship programs?

Grasping students' perspectives on the skills necessary for industrial training is pivotal, as they are fundamental to the success of internship programs (Yang, 2016). Such insight

enables institutions to align their curriculum with students' requirements. Previous research has defined communication skills to include verbal communication, giving and receiving feedback, public speaking, and participating in meetings (Jackson, 2013).

Based on the interview conducted with the students, it was discovered that oral communication skills are perceived as crucial for an internship program. S3 believes that as long as the skills are adequately addressed in their course, other necessary skills for professional success should also be adequately developed. Essentially, she views oral communication skills as critical for students' future success in the workplace and expresses confidence in the overall effectiveness of their course in preparing students for professional life.

“that interpersonal and that soft skill to be able to communicate so it doesn't hinder these students from actually working in real life, later in the work field. So, I believe other than communication skills, everything else should be alright with how our course is doing.”

Moreover, students consider oral communication skills vital not only for the purposes mentioned earlier but also for interacting with their colleagues. For example, S3 was informed about certain students being notably quiet and less participative with their colleagues in the workplace.

“The reason is, during my internship, they mentioned that there are students who are kind of like... just quiet. Meaning, it's like they don't participate with their colleagues at the workplace.”

This suggests that these students may have been reserved or lacked sufficient communication skills, leading to limited interaction with their coworkers during the internship. Consequently, insufficient communication skills not only impact interactions with colleagues but also hinder students' productivity in the workplace. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Akhtar and Parker (2024), who noted that communication challenges are likely to impede the development of learning and self-awareness. Conversely, an internship is a platform of learning and self-development which students need to take advantage of to strengthen their oral communication skills.

Another student (S2) shared handling enquiries through phone calls requires essential communication skills especially when the caller is being discourteous.

“My Supervisor give a job which is I need to handle a recruitment, and the inquiries from the candidates sometimes they are kind of like...when they call, they kind of like being a little bit like a “Karen”...so, it was kind of hard, and sometimes when I couldn't handle it, my senior will take over lah.”

“Karen” refers to someone who exhibits behaviours that stem from privilege and is perceived as entitled or excessively demanding. Handling this type of situation through phone calls definitely requires oral communication skills from the students. The student shared that sometimes she would let her senior colleagues deal with such situations. While not always she would let her senior colleagues step in, this is consistent with data from Chow (2020), Teng et al. (2021) and Ahmad and Kamarudin (2023), which revealed the incompetencies among interns concerning communication.

4.2. What oral communication skills are required at the workplace for interns during COVID-19?

During their industrial training, interns were expected to demonstrate a range of oral communication skills. Table 1 depicts the speaking tasks that the interns engaged in during the internship.

Table 1. Speaking Tasks Required During the Internship

Speaking Tasks	Percentage
Making/receiving phone calls	58
Communicating with other colleagues	90
Communicating with superior	85
Giving/receiving instructions	76
Handling telephone enquiries	34
Participating in discussions	57
Interacting with clients/customers	51
Participating in meetings	57
Dealing with public relations	26
Networking with clients/customers	31
Negotiating with clients/customers to make a deal	25
Contacting with other firms	19
Making oral presentations	25
Promoting products or services	14
Making announcements	7
Attending to clients/customers complaints	16
Holding briefings	6
Making online ticketing & online hotel reservations	1

Descriptive statistics for the items and scale were computed to answer the second research objective. The findings of this study demonstrate communicating with other colleagues was the most speaking task the interns were engaged in during the internship. This was followed by communicating with their superior (85%) and giving/receiving instructions (76%). Many respondents also were identified to engage in the following activities: Making/receiving phone calls (58%), participating in discussions and meetings (57%) and interacting with clients/ customers (51%). The speaking tasks that they were involved in during their internship during COVID-19 illustrate the importance of oral communication skills interns need to possess that can assist them to fully adapt and perform during their internship. These findings align with Coffelt et al. (2019) whereby the oral communication skills demanded from the interns include the way they interact with their colleagues or clients, present, participate or conduct meetings.

A wide range of industries were represented among the respondents who did their internships. From the result, it can be concluded that interns from various industries performed similar speaking tasks at their workplace particularly the six tasks mentioned above. The findings concur with Calfoforo (2023) that essential soft skills such as communication skills and interpersonal skills are vital in fulfilling the requirements at the workplace, which contribute to their professional growth during the internship.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that UiTM students perceived effective oral communication skills with colleagues at the workplace as vital. This perception is based

on their own experience in doing internships during difficult time back in 2020 and 2021 when the pandemic COVID-19 hit the world. Communication skills were one of many criteria to be looked at by the organisations in recruiting the staff, especially the interns. Poor communication skills at the workplace can hinder people from working productively and effectively. This too will affect everyday interaction among co-workers, although not communicating about work-related matters. Hence, students who will go for the internship programs will need to master at least the basic communication skills as this is one of the most important skills required at the workplace.

Apart from this, there were also various communication skills necessary for interns to successfully complete their internships during the COVID-19 pandemic. They needed to competently participate in a variety of professional interactions with their supervisors, clients, and coworkers, showcasing good oral communication skills that are necessary for the job. Future interns were mentioned to be equipped with the necessary oral communication skills even though there were obstacles with the real-world scenarios at the workplace to be overcome. This is particularly important for the new normal practices, where meetings, discussions, conferences, and conversations take place virtually and these online communications demand skills and etiquettes different from face-to-face interactions. Students and future interns need to be exposed to these new practices to fulfil the needs of the current market.

Therefore, universities ought to offer programs or initiatives that will help students develop skills relevant to the workplace and get ready for the workforce. This study highlights valuable insights into students' perceptions of oral communication skills needed before joining an internship and the essential communication skills required at the workplace for interns who needed to complete their internship during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that the curriculum designers and faculties need to consider this issue in designing the new syllabus for the university students in ensuring these students will still be relevant in the workforce; be it working virtually or physically. This can be done by integrating several theories to provide thorough knowledge or to extend current theories into new situations for a comprehensive understanding. Future research can also be done in light of the supervisor's point of view.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to the survey and interview protocols. It was emphasised that their participation was entirely voluntary, and they were assured of the option to withdraw from the study at any point without facing any negative consequences. Additionally, the participants' identities were kept confidential to protect their privacy.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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