

Soft Skills Needed for 21st-Century Job Readiness Among Business Education Undergraduates in the Niger Delta Region, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the communication and critical thinking skills needed by Business Education undergraduates for 21st-century job readiness in the Niger Delta region, Nigeria. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. The population of the study comprised all the 912 final-year Business Education undergraduate students in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Taro Yamane formula was used to determine the sample size of 280 final year student of Business Education. Proportionate random sampling techniques was also used to put the state in select eight schools in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, then simple random sampling technique to select thirty-five students in each of sampled schools. A self-structured instrument titled Communication and Critical Thinking Skills Needed by Business Education Questionnaire (CCSNBEQ). Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while t-test was employed to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that communication skills, particularly oral communication, business writing, active listening, and digital communication, as well as critical thinking skills, including analytical thinking, logical reasoning, information evaluation, and independent decision-making, are essential for 21st-century job readiness. The study further revealed that there is no significant difference between the perceptions of male and female respondents regarding the communication and critical thinking skills required for workplace readiness. The study concludes that communication and critical thinking are indispensable employability competencies that should be deliberately integrated into Business Education curricula. It recommends the adoption of learner-centred pedagogies that promote experiential learning and strengthen graduates' preparedness for the contemporary labour market.

Background to the Study

The nature of work has changed considerably in the twenty-first century due to rapid technological advancement, globalization, and the increasing digitalization of business activities. Organizations now operate in environments that are more interconnected, dynamic, and knowledge-driven than ever before. Consequently, employers increasingly expect graduates to possess not only disciplinary knowledge but also transferable skills that enable them to communicate effectively, think critically, collaborate with others, and respond to workplace challenges. These changes have shifted the focus of higher education from producing graduates with academic qualifications alone to preparing individuals who possess the competencies required to succeed in contemporary workplaces (Pang et al., 2019; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Among the competencies consistently identified as essential for employability, communication skills occupy a central position. Effective communication enables individuals to express ideas clearly, exchange information accurately, build professional relationships, and work productively with colleagues, supervisors, clients, and other stakeholders. In today's workplaces, where teamwork, customer engagement, and virtual interactions have become commonplace, communication is no longer viewed as merely the ability to speak or write well; rather, it is regarded as a strategic competence that supports collaboration, organisational effectiveness, and career progression. Existing empirical evidence demonstrates the critical role communication plays in graduate employability. Employers consistently rank communication among the most important competencies expected of new graduates, often considering it more valuable than technical expertise alone (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Likewise, Pang et al. (2019) identified communication as one of the competencies that significantly contributes to workplace effectiveness by facilitating teamwork and professional interaction. Similar conclusions were reached by Robles (2012), whose study of executive perceptions ranked communication as the most important workplace soft skill. Andrews and Higson (2008) further observed that graduates with strong communication abilities tend to integrate more easily into professional environments because they are better equipped to interact effectively with colleagues and clients. Collectively, these studies suggest that communication is fundamental to successful workplace participation and remains one of the strongest predictors of graduate employability.

On the other hand, critical thinking which has become increasingly indispensable as organisations face greater uncertainty, technological disruption, and more complex decision-making processes. Rather than relying on routine procedures, employers increasingly seek graduates who can analyse information objectively, evaluate competing alternatives, and make informed decisions based on sound reasoning. Such abilities are particularly valuable in environments characterized by continuous innovation and rapid organisational change, where employees are expected to solve problems independently and adapt to emerging challenges.

The growing importance of critical thinking has been widely acknowledged in employability research. van Laar et al. (2017) identified critical thinking as one of the core competencies required for functioning effectively within digitally enabled workplaces, emphasizing its role in evaluating information and making informed decisions. Similarly, Abrami et al. (2015), through a comprehensive meta-analysis, demonstrated that critical thinking can be intentionally developed through effective instructional strategies, indicating that universities play a significant role in preparing graduates with this competency. Butler (2012) also established that critical thinking significantly predicts real-world decision-making, particularly in situations involving uncertainty and complexity. From an employability perspective, Jackson (2014) recognised critical thinking as a core graduate competency because of its contribution to effective workplace decision-making and problem-solving. Finch et al. (2013) likewise reported that employers highly value graduates who demonstrate strong critical thinking because such individuals tend to perform more effectively and adapt more successfully within changing organisational environments. Supporting these findings, Pang et al. (2019) identified critical thinking as one of the competencies most frequently demanded by employers across different occupational settings.

The importance attached to communication and critical thinking has significant implications for Business Education. As a professional discipline, Business Education is expected to prepare graduates with the competencies required for employment in business organisations, public institutions, and entrepreneurial ventures. Beyond providing theoretical knowledge, Business Education programmes are expected to develop graduates who can communicate professionally, analyse workplace situations critically, and make informed decisions in increasingly complex business environments. Emaziye and Ito (2025) identified approaches such as project-based learning and peer review as mechanisms through which students can participate actively in learning and develop relevant knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. This perspective is relevant because communication and critical thinking are more meaningfully developed when students are required to explain their reasoning, defend positions, evaluate alternative solutions, collaborate on tasks and respond to authentic problems. Developing these competencies is particularly important because modern workplaces require graduates who can contribute meaningfully from the beginning of their careers.

Despite the acknowledged importance of communication and critical thinking, concerns remain regarding the preparedness of many university graduates for contemporary employment. Previous studies have shown that graduates often fall short of employer expectations in these competencies, creating a gap between university training and labour market requirements (Succi & Canovi, 2020). While substantial research has examined communication and critical thinking within general employability frameworks, relatively little attention has been devoted to identifying the specific competencies required by Business Education undergraduates within the context of the Niger Delta. Given the unique economic realities and evolving labour market demands within the region, there is a need for context-specific evidence that can inform curriculum

improvement and graduate preparation. Against this background, this study seeks to identify the communication skills and determine the critical thinking skills needed by Business Education undergraduates for 21st-century job readiness in the Niger Delta. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on graduate employability while providing empirical evidence that can support curriculum enhancement and better align Business Education with the competency demands of the contemporary workplace.

The increasing emphasis on employability has highlighted the importance of communication and critical thinking as essential competencies for success in the twenty-first-century workplace. Although Business Education programmes are designed to prepare graduates with both professional knowledge and workplace skills, concerns continue to be raised about the extent to which graduates possess the competencies required by contemporary employers. Many graduates experience difficulties communicating effectively in professional settings, presenting ideas clearly, participating in collaborative work environments, and applying critical thinking when making workplace decisions. These deficiencies often reduce their competitiveness in the labour market despite possessing relevant academic qualifications. While several studies have established the importance of communication and critical thinking within general employability frameworks, most have concentrated on employer perceptions, graduate self-assessments, or broad competency models. Relatively few studies have specifically examined the communication and critical thinking skills required by Business Education undergraduates within the unique socio-economic context of the Niger Delta. Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence that can guide curriculum improvement and skills development within Business Education programmes in the region. This gap in knowledge creates uncertainty regarding the specific communication and critical thinking competencies that should be prioritised in preparing Business Education undergraduates for contemporary employment. It is this gap that necessitated the present study, which seeks to identify the communication skills and determine the critical thinking skills needed by Business Education undergraduates for 21st-century job readiness in the Niger Delta.

Research Questions

1. What is the communication skills needed by Business Education undergraduates for 21st-century job readiness in the Niger Delta?
2. What is the critical thinking skills needed by Business Education undergraduates for 21st-century job readiness in the Niger Delta?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and was tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

1. H_{01} : There is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female Business Education undergraduates on the communication skills needed for 21st-century job readiness in the Niger Delta.

2. H_{02} : There is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female Business Education undergraduates on the critical thinking skills needed for 21st-century job readiness in the Niger Delta.

Method

This study employed a descriptive survey research design. The study was conducted in selected tertiary institutions offering Business Education programmes within the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The population comprised 912 final-year (400-level) Business Education undergraduates enrolled in the selected institutions: Delta State University, Abraka (86), Niger Delta University, Wilberforce (44), University of Uyo (96), University of Benin (46), Cross River State College of Education Affiliate (38), Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt (440), Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri (77), Federal University of Agriculture, Umudike (85) from departmental handbook (2026). A sample of 280 respondents was drawn from the population using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula. The sample was proportionately allocated across the participating institutions to ensure adequate representation. Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire titled *Communication and Critical Thinking Skills Needed by Business Education Undergraduate Questionnaire (CCTSNBEQ)*. The instrument comprised two sections. Section A captured respondents' demographic characteristics, while Section B measured communication and critical thinking skills using a four-point rating scale ranging from Strongly Agree (4) to Strongly Disagree (1). The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by two experts in Business Education and one expert in Educational Measurement and Evaluation. A pilot study involving 30 final-year Business Education students from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, yielded an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82 indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Data collection was carried out by the researcher with the help of research assistants in each of the institutions. All 280 copies of the questionnaire were properly completed and returned, resulting in a 100% response rate. The data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions, hypotheses were tested using the independent-samples *t*-test at the 0.05 level of significance to determine whether significant differences existed between the mean responses of male and female Business Education undergraduates regarding the communication and critical thinking skills required for 21st-century job readiness.

Results

Research Question 1: What communication skills are needed by Business Education undergraduates for 21st-century job readiness in the Niger Delta?

H_{01} : There is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female Business Education undergraduates on the communication skills needed for 21st-century job readiness in the Niger Delta

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Respondents on Communication Skills Needed for 21st-Century Job Readiness

S/N	Questionnaire Statement	Male (N =126)			Female (N = 154)		
		X̄	SD	Remark	X̄	SD	Remark
1	The ability to communicate ideas clearly in oral discussions is required for job readiness.	2.93	0.89	Agreed	3.10	0.94	Agreed
2	Effective business writing skills are necessary for job readiness.	2.83	0.97	Agreed	3.10	0.88	Agreed
3	Active listening skills are important for workplace interaction.	3.20	0.70	Agreed	3.08	0.80	Agreed
4	Digital communication skills such as email etiquette are important for modern workplaces.	3.21	0.65	Agreed	3.18	0.76	Agreed
Grand Total		3.04	0.49	Agreed	3.12	0.50	Agreed

The results presented in Table 1 shows the mean ratings of male and female respondents on communication skills required for 21st century Job Readiness. The grand mean scores of 3.04 (SD = 0.49) for male respondents and 3.12 (SD = 0.50) for female respondents indicate that both groups agreed that communication skills are essential for workplace effectiveness, since the mean values exceeded the criterion mean of 2.50. Specifically, male respondents agreed that the ability to communicate ideas clearly in oral discussions (M = 2.93, SD = 0.89), effective business writing skills (M = 2.83, SD = 0.97), active listening skills (M = 3.20, SD = 0.70), and digital communication skills such as email etiquette (M = 3.21, SD = 0.65) are important for workplace effectiveness. Similarly, female respondents agreed that the ability to communicate ideas clearly in oral discussions (M = 3.10, SD = 0.94), effective business writing skills (M = 3.10, SD = 0.88), active listening skills (M = 3.08, SD = 0.80), and digital communication skills such as email etiquette (M = 3.18, SD = 0.76) are essential for 21st century job readiness.

Table 2: Independent Samples t-test Analysis of Male and Female Respondents' on Communication Skills

Gender	No. of Res. (N)	(X̄)	SD	Df	LS	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Male	126	3.04	0.49	278	0.05	-1.197	±1.968	Accepted
Female	154	3.12	0.50					

The result of the t-test indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean ratings of male (M = 3.04, SD = 0.49) and female (M = 3.12, SD = 0.50) respondents on communication skills, $t\text{-cal} = -1.197$, $p = .232 > .05$. Therefore, the null

hypothesis was accepted, implying that gender did not significantly influence respondents' ratings of communication skills.

Research Question 2: What critical thinking skills are needed by Business Education undergraduates for effective workplace performance in the Niger Delta?

Ho2: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female Business Education Undergraduates on the critical thinking skills needed for effective workplace performance in the Niger Delta.

Table 3: Mean Ratings of Respondents on Critical Thinking Skills

S/N	Questionnaire Statement	Male (N = 126)			Female (N = 154)		
		X̄	SD	Remark	X̄	SD	Remark
1	The Ability to analyze workplace situations critically is necessary for job readiness.	2.69	0.92	Agreed	2.97	0.85	Agreed
2	The Ability to evaluate information before making decisions is important in business environments.	3.31	0.57	Agreed	3.16	0.72	Agreed
2	Logical reasoning skills are necessary for effective workplace performance.	3.25	0.62	Agreed	3.12	0.81	Agreed
3	The Ability to think independently is necessary for workplace effectiveness.	3.12	0.75	Agreed	3.08	0.78	Agreed
Grand Total		3.09	0.34	Agreed	3.08	0.48	Agreed

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that male respondents had a grand mean score of 3.09 with a standard deviation of 0.34, while female respondents had a grand mean score of 3.08 with a standard deviation of 0.48 on critical thinking skills. The grand mean scores of both groups exceeded the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating that both male and female respondents agreed that critical thinking skills are essential for workplace effectiveness. This suggests that respondents perceived the ability to analyze workplace situations critically, evaluate information before making decisions, apply logical reasoning, and think independently as important skills for job readiness in the 21st century.

Table 4: Independent Samples t-test Analysis of Male and Female Respondents' on Critical Thinking Skills

Gender	No. of Respondents (N)	(X̄)	SD	df	LS	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Male	126	3.09	0.34	278	0.05	0.206	±1.968	Accepted
Female	154	3.08	0.48					

The independent samples t-test showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean ratings of male respondents ($M = 3.09, SD = 0.34$) and female respondents ($M = 3.08, SD = 0.48$) on critical thinking skills, $t_{\text{cal}} = 0.206, p = .837 > .05$. Since the calculated t-value (0.206) is less than the critical t-value (± 1.968), the null hypothesis was accepted, indicating that gender did not significantly influence respondents' perceptions of critical thinking skills.

Discussion of Findings

From research question one, the findings revealed that communication skills are highly needed by Business Education undergraduates in preparation for 21st-century job readiness in the Niger Delta region, as evidenced by the grand mean scores of 3.04 ($SD = 0.49$) and 3.12 ($SD = 0.50$) obtained by male and female respondents, respectively, which exceeded the criterion mean of 2.50. Specifically, the respondents agreed that the ability to communicate ideas clearly in oral discussions, effective business writing skills, active listening skills, and digital communication skills such as email etiquette are essential competencies for 21st-century job readiness. This finding reflects the growing recognition of communication as a foundational competency for graduates seeking successful transition into contemporary workplaces.

The finding is consistent with the study of Robles (2012), who ranked communication as the most important soft skill required by employers for workplace success. Robles emphasized that effective communication enhances professional relationships, facilitates teamwork, and improves productivity in organizational settings. Similarly, Succi and Canovi (2020) found that communication skills are among the most valued competencies by employers and are often rated above technical knowledge due to their role in workplace adaptability and collaboration. The finding also agrees with Pang *et al.* (2019), who identified communication as central to graduate success across various professional fields. According to their study, communication competencies enable employees to articulate ideas clearly, work collaboratively, and resolve workplace challenges effectively. This supports the present finding that oral communication, active listening, and business writing skills are indispensable for 21st-century job readiness. The high rating accorded to digital communication skills further aligns with van Laar *et al.* (2020), who identified digital communication as a major component of 21st-century competencies. In today's technology-driven work environment, digital tools such as emails, virtual meetings, and online collaborative platforms have become essential for professional interaction. This suggests that Business Education undergraduates must develop competence in both traditional and digital communication skills to enhance their preparedness for 21st-century job readiness.

The study further revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between male and female respondents regarding communication skills needed for 21st-century job readiness ($t = -1.197, p = .232 > .05$). This implies that both genders share similar perceptions regarding the importance of communication skills in preparing graduates for contemporary workplace demands. This finding corroborates the work of Andrews

and Higson (2008), who noted that communication competence is universally important for successful transition from school to work irrespective of gender. From research question two, the findings revealed that critical thinking skills are highly needed by Business Education undergraduates in preparation for 21st-century job readiness in the Niger Delta region, as evidenced by the grand mean scores of 3.09 (SD = 0.34) and 3.08 (SD = 0.48) obtained by male and female respondents, respectively, which exceeded the criterion mean of 2.50. Specifically, the respondents agreed that the ability to analyse workplace situations critically, evaluate information before making decisions, apply logical reasoning, and think independently are essential competencies for preparation for 21st-century job readiness. This finding reinforces the growing recognition of critical thinking as one of the most indispensable soft skills required for employability and career sustainability in the contemporary labour market. This finding is consistent with the work of van Laar *et al.* (2017), who identified critical thinking as a central component of 21st-century digital skills, particularly in evaluating information and solving problems in technology-driven work environments. Their study emphasized that in a rapidly changing workplace, employees must possess analytical abilities to process information effectively and make sound decisions. This aligns with the present study, which found that Business Education undergraduates recognize the importance of analytical thinking and information evaluation in preparing for 21st-century job readiness.

The result also agrees with Abrami *et al.* (2015), whose meta-analysis established that critical thinking can be deliberately developed through structured educational strategies and is fundamental for competence development. Their findings suggest that critical thinking is not merely an innate ability but a teachable skill that significantly enhances graduates' preparedness for contemporary work environments. Similarly, Balcar (2016) found that critical thinking significantly predicts real-life decision-making outcomes, especially in uncertain and complex situations. The respondents' agreement that logical reasoning and independent thinking are important indicates their awareness of the practical role of critical thinking in workplace decision-making and problem resolution. The finding further corroborates Jackson (2014), Finch *et al.* (2013), Pang *et al.* (2019), and Robles (2012), who identified critical thinking as a core employability competency closely linked to problem-solving, innovation, adaptability, and effective decision-making. Likewise, Succi and Canovi (2020) found that both employers and graduates perceive critical thinking as crucial for employability, although gaps often exist between expected and actual competence levels.

This observation is particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where Okolie *et al.* (2020), Ogunleye and Oyekanmi (2020), Akinyemi and Oke (2015), and Eze and Nwosu (2018) established that critical thinking significantly influences graduate employability and career success. Their studies provide empirical support for the present finding that Business Education undergraduates require strong evaluative, analytical, and reasoning skills to enhance their preparedness for 21st-century job readiness. The study further revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean ratings of male respondents (M = 3.09, SD = 0.34) and female respondents (M = 3.08, SD = 0.48)

regarding critical thinking skills needed for preparation for 21st-century job readiness, $t^*(278) = 0.206$, $p^* = .837 > .05$. This implies that both male and female respondents shared similar perceptions concerning the importance of critical thinking skills. The finding suggests that critical thinking is universally recognized as an essential competency for preparation for 21st-century job readiness irrespective of gender. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of integrating critical thinking development into Business Education curricula through practical and experiential learning strategies such as case studies, problem-based learning, simulations, internships, and reflective exercises to better equip undergraduates in the Niger Delta with the analytical, evaluative, and decision-making competencies required for preparation for 21st-century job readiness.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it was concluded that communication and critical thinking skills are indispensable skills for Business Education undergraduates in preparing for the realities of the 21st-century labour market in the Niger Delta, Nigeria and beyond. The contemporary workplace demands more than technical knowledge; it also requires graduates who can communicate effectively and think critically. The study established that Business Education undergraduates recognize the relevance of these skills and consider them necessary for employability and career success.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Business Education departments should deliberately incorporate activities that promote oral presentation, business writing, active listening, and digital communication competencies into classroom instruction to enhance students' communication skills required for 21st-century job readiness.
2. Lecturers should adopt learner-centred instructional strategies such as case studies, debates, problem-based learning, reflective exercises, and scenario analyses to strengthen students' critical thinking, logical reasoning, and independent decision-making abilities.

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