

These fact sheets have been developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with information on areas of professional concern. They provide a summary as well as identifying some annotated references that can be used to broaden knowledge and extend understanding. These references can be obtained through the AMEP Resource Centre at rescentr@nceltr.mq.edu.au

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Context

Under the pressures of globalisation, de-regulation and the accompanying casualisation of the workforce, the Australian workplace in which many AMEP clients will be looking for employment has undergone radical change in recent times. In order to respond to these conditions, employers are looking for a workforce with both the technical skills to meet the requirements of their job, and a range of ‘generic’ skills that are applicable across different industries and workplaces.

Post-compulsory training in both technical and ‘generic’ skills is offered in Australia, through Vocational Education and Training (VET), under a set of standards called the National Quality Training Framework. This system:

- provides nationally recognised and comparable, competency-based qualifications in vocational skills training;
- is delivered through training packages and accredited courses;
- is offered at TAFEs, private and community training providers, and secondary schools.

These qualifications may be taken at up to six levels in most industries, and many can articulate into courses leading to university qualifications. Since 1992, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) has advised on national policy and regulation, and has been responsible for registering and monitoring the approximately 4,000 registered training organisations (RTOs) in Australia. After June 2005, however, these functions will be carried out by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

Although many workplaces in Australia are multi-cultural, good English language skills will be

demanding of those AMEP clients if they are to be successful in gaining and prospering in employment. In addition to meeting the technical demands of the job, they will also need to develop, through English, the ‘generic’ skills necessary to navigate a new work culture, and maintain good working relations with clients, colleagues and bosses over the longer term. While many immigrants to Australia have already developed comparable generic skills through their workplace experiences in other countries and contexts, some of these skills may be accomplished differently in an Australian workplace. That is, although these skills are thought of as ‘generic’ across different workplaces, from a multicultural perspective, the tools and strategies involved in using these skills may vary across languages and cultures. Speakers of English who are new to Australia may therefore need the opportunity to address aspects of these generic skills more explicitly as part of their English language learning.

The nature of generic skills

Generic skills (sometimes called ‘employability’, or ‘soft’ skills) are those skills which are not industry-specific, but which are useful in different contexts in the workplace, in further study, and in adult life in general. Different stakeholders have defined generic skills in various ways, but essentially they refer to those skills which allow an individual to reach their potential and to apply their knowledge in a useful and integrated way.

A number of key government and industry-led committees have reported on what these skills might look like, and on their importance to employers in Australia. These reports are summarised briefly in Table 1 on page 2.

There is still no nationally agreed framework for

Table 1: A brief history of the interest in generic skills

Karmel Committee 1985	Review of quality of education	Recommended that compulsory education should help prepare students for conditions in contemporary workplaces and should pay attention to 'general competencies' in thinking skills, information identification skills, and independent and team work.
Finn Committee 1991	Review of post-compulsory education	Recommended six key competencies in the area of generic skills to meet the demand for multiskilling and adaptability in industry.
Mayer Committee 1992	Australian Education Mayer Committee	After wide consultation, identified seven key learnable and assessable generic competencies as essential for employment, important at entry level in a range of industries, and relevant to a range of settings both at work and in wider society.
Australian Industry report 1999	Commissioned by industry	Identified essential generic skills relevant to basic skills (eg literacy and numeracy), interpersonal skills (eg communication and teamwork), and personal attributes (eg skills in lifetime learning and adapting to change), and noted their importance for industry.
Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry/Business Council of Australia 2002	ACCI/BCA review of employers' views	Identified a list of key employability skills and proposed an Employability Skills Framework, which incorporated the Mayer Key Competencies with the addition of personal attributes.

generic skills, but the Mayer Key Competencies and the ACCI/BCA Employability Skills Framework (DEST 2002) have been the most influential and are widely used in training packages. While these two sets of skills are not identical, there is considerable overlap, as can be seen in Table 2 below where they are summarised and compared.

Table 2: Generic skills in the Employability Skills Framework and Mayer Key Competencies

Employability skills	Mayer Key Competencies
• Communication skills	• Communicating ideas and information • Using mathematical ideas and techniques
• Teamwork skills	• Working with others and in teams
• Problem-solving skills	• Solving problems
• Initiative and enterprise skills	
• Planning and organising skills	• Collecting, analysing and organising information • Planning and organising activities
• Self-management skills	
• Learning skills	
• Technology skills	• Using technology

Source: *Employability skills for the future*, ACCI/BCA (2002).

One area of 'skill' mentioned in the Employability Skills Framework but not in the Mayer Key Competencies is 'personal attributes' (see Table 3 below). However, while employers are keen that employees should have such attributes, these particular skills are controversial in that they are not necessarily 'learnable' in the same way as other skills.

Table 3: Personal attributes listed in the Employability Skills Framework

• honesty	• personal presentation
• commitment	• common sense
• loyalty	• positive self-esteem
• enthusiasm	• sense of humour
• reliability	• ability to deal with pressure
• balanced attitude to work and home	• adaptability
• motivation	

The Employability Skills Framework covers in some detail the elements of each skill area regarded as crucial by employers. Full details can be found in the ACCI/BCA (2002) report (see **Annotated bibliography**). However, while it is important to agree on what generic skills are, it is also crucial to recognise that any listing of such skills must be responsive to changing circumstances.

A recent review of employers found that they were generally satisfied with training for the more technical skills, but were not always happy with the development of generic skills, suggesting that these

might need more explicit attention during training. Explicit attention to certain generic skills may be particularly important for those whose previous experience of workplace communication and teamwork have been developed outside Australia.

Some important aspects of generic skills for speakers from other language backgrounds

While all generic skills are important, employees from other language and cultural backgrounds may find that those skills which depend heavily on how language is used in context will be particularly challenging, because people interact in different ways in different cultures. So, a speaker who has developed generic skills in, say, 'communication' or 'teamwork' in their first language and culture may find that they cannot necessarily transfer them directly for use in Australian contexts because the conventions and expectations involved are different.

The elements of communication

To take communication skills as an example, the Employability Skills Framework identified the following elements as being particularly important:

- Listening and understanding
- Speaking clearly and directly
- Writing for an audience
- Negotiating responsively
- Reading independently
- Empathising
- Literacy/oracy in LOTEs
- Numeracy
- Understanding customer needs
- Persuading effectively
- Networking
- Being assertive
- Sharing information.

While AMEP clients may be very good at some of these elements, such as 'speaking and writing in a language other than English' and 'using numeracy', they may find others more problematic. Although they may be very proficient at 'speaking clearly and directly', 'negotiating responsively' and 'persuading effectively' in their first language and culture, they may find that these skills are interpreted and accomplished in subtly different ways in English. Thus, even fairly proficient learners may find that they do not understand how such communicative goals are effectively achieved in Australian contexts, and may not have a complete repertoire of devices for accomplishing them.

The importance of micro-elements of communication

This makes it vitally important for us to understand exactly what it is that we do when we communicate successfully – that is, to understand the micro-elements of how we communicate. For example, what exactly do we mean by 'negotiate responsively'? And what exactly do we do to achieve this? The answers to these questions are complicated by the fact that we are not always conscious of the micro-elements that we use. This means, of course, that they often remain unexamined, and therefore do not find their way into explicit teaching about language use and communication.

Such micro-elements might include, for example:

- how long we pause before answering, – for example, is it polite to leave a long pause or only a short one?
- how we introduce what we say – for example, the meaning of short markers such as 'well', 'ah', 'oh', 'yeah but', 'yeah no', 'so', 'look', 'okay' to introduce a response;
- how baldly we state our opinions – for example, 'No, I don't want to do that' vs 'Well, perhaps we could do it this way ...';
- how much and when we soften a request – for example, 'just', modals, 'I wonder if I could ...', 'I was hoping to ...';
- how and to whom we use smiles and eye contact.

The danger of transferring micro-elements

Such micro-elements of communication vary across cultures, and learners are likely to transfer the way they use them from their first language and culture into their use of English. What may be a perfectly acceptable usage in one culture may have a completely different effect in English, and so serious short-term and long-term misunderstandings can arise quite inadvertently. This can be particularly dangerous in workplace interactions, where, under the pressure of work, we can often react positively or negatively to the 'little things' or micro-elements about the way someone talks without even realising it. When we react negatively, we tend to blame the person and not their English!

It is therefore crucial for learners to understand how such micro-elements are used in English in different contexts. The use of the apparently innocuous phrase 'of course' is a good example. In many languages (for example, Russian), the equivalent for 'of course' simply has the force of an emphatic 'yes', whereas in English it often also has the added meaning of 'yes, and it should be obvious'. This

means that speakers of English who inadvertently use 'of course', when they merely want to signal enthusiastic agreement, often sound irritated. Over time, such small miscommunications can contribute to the development of unwelcome stereotypes and long-term misunderstandings.

The importance of communicative values

If learners are to be able to communicate successfully at work, it is also important for them to understand the values that lie behind a communicative situation, and these may not be evident, even to native speakers. These communicative values may be radically different in various cultures, even if the setting is otherwise similar. Thus the different values hidden below the surface of a similar interaction (say, a request by an employee to take leave) in two cultures may mean that the same act may be tackled in a very different way, even within the same type of company or workplace. While we do not often talk about them, we can see evidence of our communicative values in the way we approach an interaction. For example, which of the following values do you think best describes acceptable communication in Australia?

Which communicative values are more common in Australia?

Is it more important to:	Or is it more usual to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> show overt respect to those of higher rank?(eg by using 'Sir' to address the boss) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> downplay overt hierarchical differences? (eg by using his/her first name to address the boss)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wait until asked to give your view? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> suggest new ideas without invitation?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> generally use a serious tone? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> generally use a jocular tone?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> adopt a distanced 'professional' stance (eg use formal language). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> adopt a familiar, friendly stance? (eg use informal language).

You can find more discussion, examples and teaching materials to address some of these issues in *Teaching in action* (Yates 2005).

A recent project¹ investigated the experiences of 14 tertiary-educated learners who went from the AMEP into 'white collar' employment in Australia. The findings of this study suggest that it is just as important for learners to understand the cultural knowledge and values underpinning the job-seeking processes (that is, making an application, going for interview) as it is to understand those underlying the process of communication in the workplace.

What the teacher can do

By focusing explicitly on the micro-elements and communicative values that native or expert speakers draw on when they talk to each other, teachers can help learners to develop their 'generic' skills in communication and teamwork in English.

To help learners negotiate the job-seeking process

Some of the cultural assumptions and micro-elements of communication that might be useful to learners who are looking for employment were suggested by the study. Some of these are summarised below.

The teacher can highlight:

- *the cultural values and expectations that lie behind the job application and interview process.* For example, it may not be evident to learners that at an interview:
 - an interviewer is assessing the qualities of the applicant as a person, and not only how their qualifications meet published requirements;
 - job applicants need to speak about themselves directly and 'sell' themselves by projecting relevant personal attributes, as well as highlighting aspects of their experience that are relevant to the job;
- *the relationship between what is written in a job application and what is said at the interview.* Learners may not be aware that important information provided in writing should also be discussed in the interview.

Many learners in the study reported that the most important skills for the workplace were not those relating to the specific content of the job, but rather to communication at work.

To help learners communicate successfully in the workplace

Teachers can also highlight aspects of the communicative culture of the Australian workplace, such as:

- the value placed on the signalling (or not signalling) of relative rank;
- the role of informality and informal communication at work;
- the individualistic nature of the Australian workplace;
- the rights and responsibilities of an employee in the workplace;
- how to access help if needed.

Learners can be encouraged to focus on the detail of how people talk to each other at work, and

then reflect on how a similar interaction might be conducted in a comparable context in their own culture. Important skills to focus on might include:

- how to communicate with those at different levels of the hierarchy;
- how to communicate informally by email or in casual conversation, for example, the types of openings used (what to say and how to introduce it), the types of topics talked about and what they represent (for example, what different football cultures mean);
- how to interpret something said to them in an apparently informal way;
- the differences in formal communication in speaking and writing (including the differences between emails and written memos);
- giving and interpreting instructions and directives in the workplace, including how to approach and soften requests and how to use persuasion.

While there are some teaching materials that address these issues, teachers may be able to target students' needs more specifically by collecting their own samples of authentic communication and analysing them for these micro-elements. In this way, learners can see how an interaction is *actually* conducted, and not how we think that it should be done! Suggested activities focusing on how some of these aspects of communication can be tackled in the classroom can be found in Yates (2005).

Annotated bibliography

Aspire Training & Consulting (2003). *Fostering generic skills*. Melbourne: Aspire Training & Consulting.

This book is designed as a tool for those involved in teaching generic skills to young adults (15–19 years), and so the focus is on skills that younger learners with little workplace experience might need to develop. However, it does provide a clear and accessible overview of generic skills, and how teachers can approach them. Although the book does not specifically tackle language issues, the suggested activities could provide a useful basis for more targeted language work, particularly if the teacher can try them out with native speakers first to do their own analysis of the demands of the task.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia (2002). *Employability skills for the future*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

This crucial report has been influential in defining the nature of generic skills. In particular, the Employability Skills Framework presented on page 8 has been widely used as an outline of the generic skill base that employers would like their workforce to have.

Curtin, P. *Employability skills for the future*. National Centre for Vocational Education Research:
<http://www.ncver.edu.au/>

This summarises the ACCI/BCA 2002 report and the influences on the development of the resulting Employability Skills Framework. It describes the framework and how it links to the Mayer Key Competencies, and is therefore a relatively quick and useful way of coming to grips with the nature and direction of generic skills. It is downloadable free from the NCVER website (see the **Internet resources** section below).

National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) (2003). *Insight*, Issue 10. Adelaide: NCVER.

This publication provides news and information on the activities of NCVER, and this issue takes a look at the growing significance of generic skills and reports on a survey of employers in Australia, Britain and the USA.

National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) (2003). *Defining generic skills: At a glance*. Adelaide: NCVER.

National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) (2003). *Fostering generic skills in VET programs and workplaces: At a glance*. Adelaide: NCVER.

These two publications give a useful overview and background to generic skills and their increasing role in different educational sectors and in the workplace in Australia and overseas.

Yates, L. (Ed.). (forthcoming). *Teaching in action: Generic skills*. Sydney: NCELTR.

Yates, L. (2004). The 'secret rules of language': Tackling pragmatics in the classroom. *Prospect*, 19(1), 3–21.

Internet resources

Australian National Training Authority website:

<http://www.anta.gov.au/>

This is the website of the Australian National Training Authority, established in 1992 as a statutory government authority to ensure that the skills of the Australian labour force meet the needs of commerce and industry, and to provide individuals with opportunities for vocational education and training (VET). On this website you can learn more about the VET sector, including advice on training packages and the Australian Qualifications Framework, and you can download recent publications relating to the sector and ANTA's activities. After June 2005, however, ANTA will be abolished and its activities conducted under the auspices of the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training: <http://www.dest.gov.au/>

National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) website: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/>

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) provides research and statistics about vocational education and training (VET). Their website is a rich source of information of various different aspects of employment-related training, and some useful publications on generic skills can be accessed from the following webpage:
<http://www.ncver.edu.au/teaching/21013.html>

Compiled by Dr Lynda Yates
Senior Researcher
AMEP Research Centre
La Trobe University

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