

Essential English skills for vocational students: Insights from vocational staff

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Abstract

How can vocational English teachers make their teaching more practical? This article highlights essential English language skills required for successful navigation of workplace tasks in apprenticeship settings. Based on a survey among 175 vocational staff across 16 trade areas, each representing an apprenticeship establishment, the article highlights critical English language skills used in concerned workplaces. While there were variations across trades and workplaces in terms of frequency, amount and type of basic essential English language skills, there were similarities in terms of primary language skills used across trades classified

under three broader vocational sectors. The vocational staff's assessment of the language skills that the apprentices bring to their workplace are discussed. The implication of the findings to English language learning and teaching are outlined.

1. Introduction

Vocational English teachers can make their teaching practical and relevant by building on essential language communication skills used in trade-specific workplaces. Through apprenticeship provision, vocational students draw on relevant classroom learning to demonstrate vocational behaviour. Motivated to maximize

employability by successful demonstration of workplace behaviour, they adopt pragmatism and invest selectively in classroom learning that gives them immediate workplace utility (Skarpaas, 2024). With a curricular status as a common subject, English teaching covers a range of competences and communication skills that have general academic, everyday as well as domain-specific significance (Skarpaas & Hellekjær, 2021). Because of this status, English is traditionally considered a classroom-only subject, separate from workplace. Consequently, teachers of English who typically lack trade-specific experience and qualifications – unlike trade-



Source: industry view /Getty Images.

specific subject teachers – are not involved in students' workplace learning and assessment (Skarpaas & Hellekjær, 2021). For English teachers, this indicates a potential for mismatches between classroom teaching and workplace communication needs of their students.

Vocational staff serve as vital bridges between formal classroom learning and practical work life. Because these staff members work closely with apprentices, they act as key sources of workplace socialization. Their realistic understanding of employer expectations allows them to play an instrumental role in helping students apply their formal skills to real-world tasks. In meeting the broader mandates for more practical and relevant

teaching by addressing the potential mismatches, this study highlights some essential English language skills used in workplaces from the perspective of vocational staff. The study offers useful insights to vocational English teaching where teachers' professional experiences and teaching are not considered integral to workplace learning of the vocational students.

The study's focus on mapping and highlighting essential English skills used at the workplace should not be understood as limited to domain-only specific language communication of the concerned trade. While those essential skills could be classified under general everyday communication skills or domain-specific language use,

they are critical to successful accomplishment of work assignment. The findings are of relevance to educators who teach or assess English language of the future or current students in the specific trade areas and associated study programs discussed below.

2. Study context and sites

This article is based on data collected through administration of a survey questionnaire over a two-year period (2023–2025). While the questionnaire addressed a wider range of literacy skills and competencies related to reading, writing and numeracy; we focus on the survey responses specifically related to English language skills. The respondents represented apprenticeship establishments in 15 trade areas located within the three administrative regions of Eastern and Southeastern Norway. The trades are related to three broader vocational study programs: Health and Social Care (HO), Technology and Industry (TIF), and Building and Construction (BAT). These programs accounted for 25% (HO), 20% (TIF), and 13% (BAT) of the total vocational student population (Udir, 2026a). The represented trade areas employed 39% of total apprentices in the country (Udir, 2026b). The apprenticeship establishments represented following trade areas under three associated study programs.

Health and Social Care: Health & Care; Child & Youth Work (35 employers)

Technology and Industry: Light Vehicles, Heavy Vehicles, CNC Machinery, Heavy Industrial Machinery (59 employers)

Building and Construction: Carpentry, Plumbing, Concrete Work, Masonry and Tiling, Painting and Decoration, Machinery Operation, Rock and Mining, Road and Infrastructure, Landscape and Gardening (81 employers)

3. Respondents and data

A total of 175 vocational staff each representing an apprentice establishment responded to the survey questionnaire. They held necessary qualifications mandated for skilled workers in Norway, which means they were either vocational graduates of concerned trade or had secured trade-certification through considerable work experience. Some respondents, particularly within HO sector, had obtained higher qualification, and held senior positions such as Nurses, or Kindergarten teachers. All the respondents had experience of working alongside apprentices as colleagues, mentors or immediate reference persons.

The survey questions related to English mapped the share and frequency of its use in three basic skills i.e. oral communication, reading and writing. In addition, the respondents' assessment of the apprentices in those required skills were also mapped. This assessment concerned whether they have experienced any gaps in the apprentices' English language skills that could hinder their successful execution of trade related assignment. The survey included close-ended multiple-choice items to elicit information related to frequency and amount of basic language

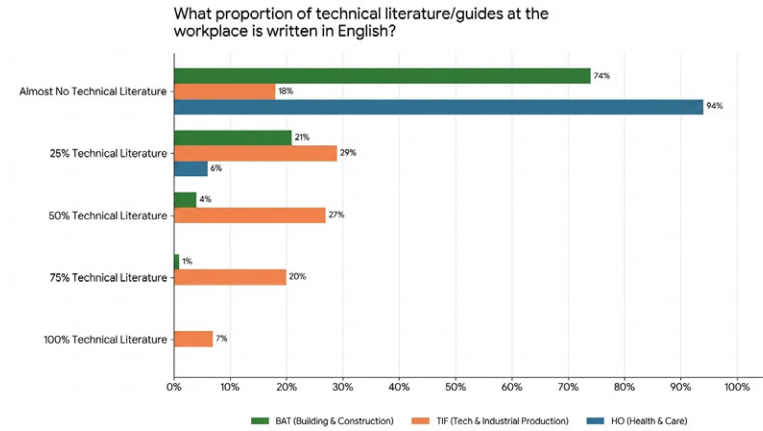


Table 1: Technical literature in English.

skills in use. Concerning their perceived gaps in apprentices essential and relevant English skills, the items were open ended which allowed the participants to mention the practical challenge(s).

4. Results and analysis

The survey items mapped the share of English essential for workplace in three basic skills reading, oral communication and writing. As shown in the presentation of the results, the data from various trade areas are classified under three overarching related study programs. In addition, the respondents' assessment of the challenge facing apprentices with regards to the essential work-related English skills are also presented as results. The analysis describes the results and discusses the variations across vocational sectors in terms of actual basic skills in use. When applicable, we also discuss within sector variations and discrepancies.

4.1. English reading skill in use in the workplace

In work context, an important language related skill concerns the ability to read and understand written instructions, manuals, or other work-related literature. Regarding English language, the need for reading skills depends on the share of English in essential technical literature. To figure out this, our survey mapped the proportion of essential technical literature used in respective workplaces.

As shown in Table 1, TIF clearly stood out in the share of literature in English. Despite some variations across workplaces, this sector's demand for reading technical/work related literature in English is consistently higher than other two sectors. This finding could be seen in relation to the internationalized nature of trades such as vehicle and industrial mechanics, where standard manuals for complex troubleshooting are in English. Nevertheless, TIF

related trades like heavy machinery, particularly requiring employees to operate the machinery, are strictly mandated to make the essential technical literature available in Norwegian (Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, 2026), which might explain the reported minimal or no use of English reading in around 18% of the workplaces. In contrast, only around 25% of the respondents across BAT related workplaces reported the need to read in English. The fact that almost 75% of the staff did not need to read in English could be because of the nature of the trades such as painting or structural alignment where the workplaces require team coordination through oral language use, but the need to rely on technical literature is very minimal. However, the HO sector shows a different typical profile, often characterized by a marginal only reliance on English for accessing technical literature. This also could be related to the strict regulatory provisions requiring work guidelines and procedures to be made available in Norwegian, more particularly in trades that involve direct contact with service recipients.

4.2. English use in oral communication

The second basic and essential language skill concerns the ability to communicate effectively to carry out the work. The following table summarizes the staff's response about the frequency of English used in oral communication.

As shown in Table 2, BAT staff reported use of English in oral communication at

significantly higher frequency than their counterparts in other two sectors, with nearly half of the workplaces reportedly using it 'sometimes'. However, a third of the respondents in HO related workplaces never or only rarely needed to talk in English. TIF staff occupy a middle ground in relation to those in the other two sectors, where oral communication in English is largely infrequent.

Amid the growing demand and entry of international workers with vocational skills (SSB, 2026), one could perceive and expect prominence of English as a language of workplace oral communication. This is also reflected in relatively frequent use of oral English in BAT sector. Contrastingly, employees in HO related trades, which account for a significant (around 20%) proportion of immigrant workforce (Helsedirektoratet, 2026) only marginally require to use English in oral communication. The marginal need for oral English

skills in this sector could be due to the nature of work assignment. While BAT related work assignments primarily require oral communication for team-coordination among the staff, English serves the easily accessible tool to communication across language and cultural boundaries. In TIF related traders, however, the need to understand the mechanical processes is more important, where oral communication among staff often involves use of technical and diagnostic terminologies in English for example, mechanical parts and equipment. These terminologies are often embedded to Norwegian or even used in isolation, and less likely to obstruct the workflow as workers are afforded by the machinery under question in making sense of the communication. Unlike in BAT and TIF where work related communication is often limited within the staff group, employees within HO trades primarily need to communicate with service and care recipients. As these

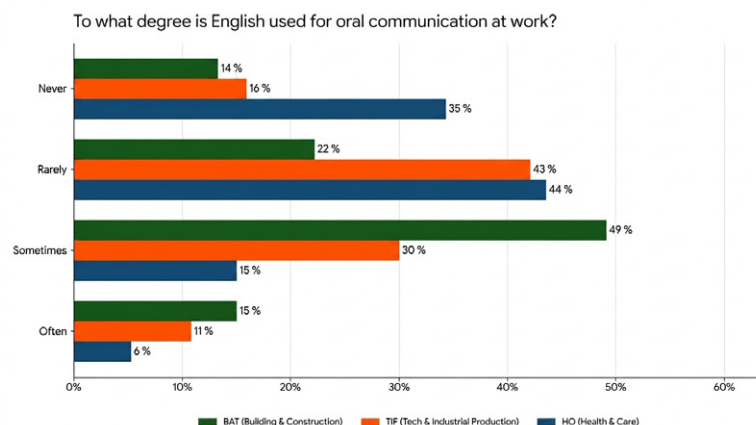


Table 2: Use of English in oral communication.

recipients are elderly, patients, or children, emphasis is on communicating precisely, in a way that is accessible, and adapted to the service users in a local and familiar language. As a measure to ensure safety and mutual relationship of trust, vocational workers of HO sectors with non-Norwegian background are expected to have a communicative competence in Norwegian.

4.3. Written English use

One of the survey items elicited the need to use written English as part of work assignment.

As shown in Table, 3, the findings reveal much lesser use of written English compared to those of reading and oral communication. Similarly, a stark contrast in writing habits across vocational sectors, is also evident. While the HO sector shows the lowest engagement with around three fourth (74%) of the workers never needing

to write in English. A handful of workplaces that reportedly used English rarely (24%) or sometimes (3%) could be associated to children and youth work, such as in schools or kindergarten where English is taught as part of the curriculum. Unlike, English writing is more common in TIF sector workplaces with the largest group (39%) reporting they “rarely” write in the language. Interestingly, BAT sector emerges as the most active in writing English, with nearly half of the respondents reportedly “sometimes” using it. BAT workers groups also stand out with around 15% often using English whereas it represented the least number of workers who “never” reported writing in English. The results, thus suggest that written English is less integrated, and used mostly occasionally by the vocational staff. Overall, construction workers reported to have written more in English compared to those in other sectors.

As evident in the results presented so far, the workplace use of English varies across trade areas. Except for TIF sector, where workers are required to use their reading skills to understand the technical literature, very limited workplaces in BAT and HO sectors require workers to read English reading materials. Similarly, oral English skills have wider relevance in workplaces within BAT sectors, whereas very limited workplaces in HO and TIF related trades require oral competence in English at the same level as in BAT. The marginal use of English in HO could be due to the prominence of Norwegian keeping in mind the recipients of service. While the ability to use English terminologies in oral communication practice is required by TIF workplaces, they can be often embedded into Norwegian or used in isolation without affecting the understanding to obstruct the workflow.

4.4. Workers’ assessment of apprentices’ English skills

In addition to eliciting English language skill in the respondent report, the survey also attempted to map gaps in apprentices’ ability to navigate the workplace through use of reported English skills. Based on their experience working with the apprentices, the respondents commented on any English language related challenges that affected the apprentices’ workplace efficiency. This survey item yielded a very small number of responses, and predominantly from TIF related workplaces. The general lack of response from across HO and BAT workplaces could also be due

To what degree is English used for written communication at work?

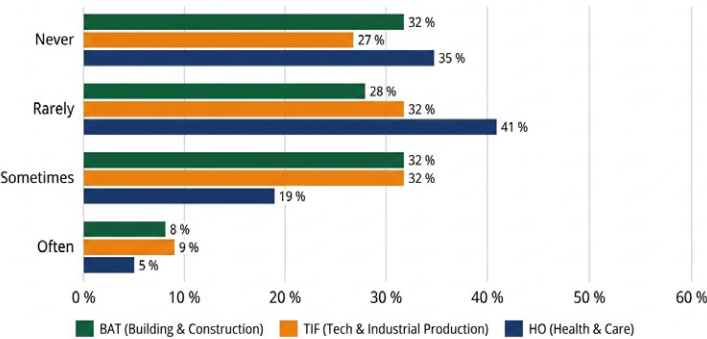


Table 3: Vocational staff’ use of written English.

to the mainly general nature of English language used in the workplaces. Coinciding with the dominance of domain specific technical literature that the TIF related workers needed to read, the domain specific diagnostic terminologies and names emerged to pose significant challenge in apprentices' efficient work performance. The fact that these workers' oral communication, even when not exclusively carried out in English, often involves embedding English names and terminologies for parts, diagnostic tools and equipment might lie behind the challenge.



Image: Generated by Google Gemini.

Of the few responses we received from HO sector, the challenges were more related to communication between staff and apprentices and concerned troubleshooting and clarifying workplace procedures. As in TIF, domain specific technological or cultural terminologies posed workplace challenge, particularly when the workers struggled with Norwegian language technical literature used in the manuals and work-related documents. There the staff reported the need for clarifying Norwegian language terminologies by using equivalent English terminologies or explanations in English for unique Norwegian terminologies.

BAT sector respondents, however, expressed satisfaction over the English language skills of the apprentices. Interestingly, they noted that the new generation of apprentices possessed stronger English languages skills than the more experienced older

vocational staff. In this field, they mentioned everyday communicative English to be sufficient at workplace with very little need to use trade specific technological terminologies.

5. Conclusion, limitations and implications

In this contribution, our goal was to map the share of English language use essential in Norwegian vocational labour market trades related to three vocational sectors that attract a significant portion of vocational students. Our findings suggested the various essential English language basic skill demands across workplaces. Based on our findings, we draw following implication for teaching, learning and assessment of English language in Norwegian high school to make them practically relevant for the students during the apprentice and employment.

- i) Vocational students in BAT can benefit from more explicit focus on oral communication practice. There English skills to support better team building, coordination, and intercultural understanding could prove practically relevant. These students could also benefit from training on writing. While our data was insufficient to map the type and length of writing the workers in various workplaces engaged in, we think it reasonable to focus on documenting work progress, and troubleshooting measures taken. Given the growing internalization and ethnolinguistic diversity in the labour market (SSB, 2026); focus on intercultural communication could prove practically relevant in efficient workplace communication.

- ii) Students studying in TIF related trades, except for some specific trades such as heavy machinery, could benefit from focus on reading comprehension activity. In doing so, using adapted texts that exemplify trade related terminologies in use in various contexts could support their vocabulary development as well.
- iii) For HO sector, use of English is very limited. However, keeping in mind the internalization of the labour market, focusing on learning the English equivalents of Norwegian work-related procedures and terminology could prove valuable.

While the above recommendations are important in establishing immediate relevance and practicality of English among vocational students, these measures should not undermine diverse general and academic English language skills. In the context of rapidly evolving demographic and digital changes, the language skills demanded in the workplaces are not fixed. Moreover, completing vocational high school is just an immediate goal for many vocational students, who progress towards higher level academic attainment. However, the findings are useful in informing educators and English language practitioners on the essential English language skills demanded to successfully

navigate the workplaces that the vocational students encounter during their study and aspire to start professional career in immediate or foreseeable future. By focusing on those skills in teaching and assessment in an informed way, teaching learning practice could be made practical so that the students are likely to invest effort.

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