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Reforming English for Employability: Insights from Employers and Graduates in a Malaysian Context

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia's multilingual economy, English proficiency is a crucial driver of graduate employability. Despite national initiatives such as the Graduate Employability Blueprint and the English Language Roadmap, a gap remains between employer expectations and graduates' actual communication skills. This study addresses that gap using an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design involving interviews with six human resource professionals and survey responses from 94 undergraduates across two Malaysian universities. Grounded in the Employability Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Bourdieu's concept of Symbolic Power, where language proficiency can influence access to opportunities, the research examines employer priorities, graduate perceptions, and strategies for curriculum reform. Findings show that employers emphasize practical communication traits such as clarity, spoken confidence, adaptability, and appropriate tone over native-like fluency or grammatical perfection. Conversely, graduates often focus on formal accuracy and overlook real-world communication needs. This mismatch, described as a "language wall," can impede career mobility even for technically capable candidates. Speaking and listening emerged as key areas for development, particularly in professional settings like presentations and meetings. The study advocates for repositioning English language education as a strategic tool for employability. Recommendations include embedding industry-specific communication modules, incorporating role-play

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and simulation tasks, and fostering stronger university–industry collaboration. These reforms align with Malaysia’s national development plans and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), promoting both workforce readiness and equitable access to professional opportunities.

Keywords: Graduate Employability; Workplace Communication; English Proficiency; Higher Education; Malaysia; Symbolic Capital; Mixed Methods; ESP

1. Introduction

Universities around the world each year produce many graduates from a variety of academic disciplines, all with the intention of launching their careers in their chosen fields. In Malaysia, however, there is mounting concern over graduate employability. Despite the continuous annual increase in the number of graduates, many of these individuals struggle to secure employment within their areas of specialization.

A notable factor in this employment challenge is English language proficiency. Employers consistently emphasize that strong English communication skills are vital for effective collaboration and sustaining global competitiveness. Yet even though English is a core part of the curriculum from early schooling onward and is recognized as a second language nationwide, many graduates do not achieve the level of proficiency expected by employers. This gap between the language skills developed in academic settings and those demanded in the workplace raises important questions about the adequacy of current English language education.

Data from the Ministry of Education Malaysia’s Graduate Tracer Study reveal that nearly 60% of fresh graduates were unemployed one year after graduation in 2019^[1]. Additionally, a report from Bank Negara Malaysia highlights a significant mismatch between the number of graduates and the demand for high-skilled labor. From 2010 to 2017, while the number of diploma and degree holders entering the workforce increased by an average of 173,457 per year, high-skilled job creation rose by only approximately 98,514 positions annually^[2]. This discrepancy indicates that the economy has not generated enough high-skilled employment opportunities to absorb the growing pool of graduates, underscoring the need for universities to produce graduates who are not only well-versed in their specific disciplines but also equipped with additional skills that enhance their career performance.

This study addresses these issues by examining the gap

between employer expectations and graduate capabilities, particularly in the realm of English communication skills. The research is guided by theoretical frameworks such as the Employability Theory^[3], which argues that employability is a combination of academic qualifications, communication skills, adaptability, and confidence; the Human Capital Theory^[4], which views language skills as a crucial investment in career success; and Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic power^[5], which suggests that proficiency in English can serve as a gatekeeper, affording advantages to some while disadvantaging others.

To address the gap between workplace demands and graduate preparedness, this study is guided by three research questions, strategically divided between two respondent groups: employers and students.

1. What are employers’ perspectives on graduates’ English communication skills?
2. What are graduates’ beliefs regarding employer expectations of English communication skills?
3. How can university English language courses be improved to align more closely with the needs of employers?

2. Literature Review

English language ability is one of the most valuable skills in Malaysia’s job market. It is considered a form of linguistic capital, which means it has both economic and social value. Bourdieu^[5] explained that language carries symbolic power, meaning it can influence how people are seen in society. In Malaysia, graduates who are fluent in English are often perceived as more professional and employable. Similarly, Becker’s^[4] Human Capital Theory suggests that investing in education and skills like English can lead to better job prospects and higher income.

Ainol and Rosli^[6] found that graduates who are con-

fidient in English tend to get hired faster and are more successful in interviews. Rahman and Idris^[7] highlighted that English is especially important in sectors like finance, hospitality, and engineering. Shanmugam^[8] also reported that a lack of English skills is one of the top reasons why many Malaysian graduates remain unemployed for extended periods.

Table 1 summarises how English language proficiency,

as a form of linguistic capital, directly influences graduate employability in Malaysia. Graduates with strong English skills tend to secure better jobs faster, earn higher salaries, and enjoy quicker career progression. In contrast, those with limited proficiency often face delays in employment and fewer advancement opportunities. This supports the idea that English is not only a communication tool but also a key economic and social asset in the Malaysian job market.

Table 1. English proficiency impact employment outcomes for graduates in Malaysia.

Aspect	Low English Proficiency	High English Proficiency
Job Opportunities	Limited to local or low-skill roles	Access to diverse roles including MNCs and private sector
Interview Performance	Lacks confidence and fluency, may struggle to explain ideas	Communicates clearly, appears confident and professional
Employer Perception	Seen as less competent or unprepared	Seen as competent, adaptable, and workplace-ready
Starting Salary	Often lower due to limited role types	Higher, especially in English-dominant environments
Promotion and Career Growth	Slower, due to limited communication skills	Faster, especially in client-facing or leadership roles
Employment Waiting Period	Longer; faces rejection due to language barriers	Shorter; meets language requirements in job listings

Source: Adapted from Ainol and Rosli^[6], Rahman and Idris^[7], and Shanmugam^[8].

2.1. Graduate Employability and Language Requirements

Recent studies continue to highlight the persistent challenge in Malaysia of aligning university education with employer expectations. According to Oh^[9], graduates generally possess technical skills, but lack of the communication abilities necessary for workplace success, especially in English, which remains the lingua franca in many sectors. This gap often results in difficulties during job placement and career advancement. Employers emphasize English proficiency not only for daily communication, but also for international collaboration and client engagement, where clarity and professionalism are crucial^[10]. Communication failures have been cited as one of the key barriers to productivity and service quality across Malaysian industries^[11]. Consequently, English language skills have become decisive in recruitment and promotion decisions, alongside technical competencies.

2.2. Perception Mismatches Between Graduates and Employers

Research indicates a notable disconnect between graduates' perceptions of their English readiness and employer expectations. Graduates tend to concentrate on mastering grammar and achieving a near-native accent, viewing these as the main markers of proficiency^[11]. However, employers

prioritize more practical aspects of communication such as tone appropriateness, confidence in speech, and adaptability to various professional contexts^[10]. This mismatch creates a perception gap that can lead to frustration on both sides: graduates feel prepared but may struggle in the workplace, while employers perceive new hires as underprepared for real-world communication demands^[11]. One example of how workplace communication is changing quickly is the emergence of influencer marketing^[12], which is leading to a greater disconnect between industry demands and academic study. Studies argue that this misalignment undermines effective hiring, training, and employee retention, highlighting the need for universities to better understand and incorporate employer-driven communication skills into curricula^[13].

2.3. Language as a Barrier to Mobility

English proficiency acts as a form of linguistic capital that can either facilitate or limit career mobility. Peltokorpi^[14] describes how insufficient language skills can create a "language ceiling," restricting access to higher-level roles that require frequent cross-cultural interaction or leadership communication. In Malaysia, where English functions as a key language in global business and trade, graduates who do not meet these linguistic expectations often face what is called a "language wall," barring them from upward mobility

despite their technical skills^[10]. This barrier is particularly prominent in sectors like finance, international trade, and tourism, where effective English communication is crucial for job performance and career progression^[15]. The concept aligns with Bourdieu's^[5] notion of symbolic power, where language proficiency becomes a gatekeeper for social and economic advancement.

2.4. English in Sectoral Contexts

The importance and nature of English requirements vary significantly by industry:

- **Banking:** Employees need to demonstrate professional tone, clear customer communication, and report writing skills. The Financial Sector Blueprint 2022–2026 by Bank Negara Malaysia^[16] highlights the increasing demand for English proficiency to support international financial services and regulatory compliance.
- **Hospitality:** Politeness, empathy, and intercultural communication are essential. The sector's reliance on diverse global clients makes English fluency critical for providing quality customer service^[17].
- **Manufacturing:** Clear understanding and communication of technical documentation, safety protocols, and operational instructions are vital. Technical English accuracy is also important in materials engineering situations, where mistakes in documentation can jeopardize workplace safety and structure integrity^[18]. Multiple studies emphasize that ambiguity in language can lead to costly errors and workplace accidents, highlighting the critical role of clear English communication in maintaining operational safety and efficiency^[10,19,20].
- **Agriculture:** While this sector may appear less dependent on English, bilingual competence (Malay and English) is important for export markets and community engagement, facilitating knowledge exchange and business growth^[14]. Indeed, Bhar and Rafik-Galea^[21] demonstrate how English functions as a pivotal medium for internal reporting, stakeholder communication and access to global agribusiness networks in Malaysian agricultural organisations.

Across all sectors, studies show that contextual fluency, the ability to use English appropriately in specific work sit-

uations, is essential. This pragmatic approach aligns with employer expectations and the dynamic nature of workplace communication^[11].

2.5. Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks help explain the significance of English proficiency in employability. Employability Theory, developed by Yorke^[3], suggests that employability extends beyond disciplinary knowledge to include skills and personal attributes that enable graduates to thrive in varied workplace environments. This theory emphasizes the value of transferable skills such as communication and adaptability, directly linking to the necessity of workplace-relevant English proficiency.

Human Capital Theory, introduced by Becker^[4], conceptualizes education, including language proficiency as an investment that enhances an individual's productivity and economic value. This perspective helps explain why students often invest substantial time and effort in learning English, expecting better employment prospects and higher earning potential.

Symbolic Power, a concept proposed by Bourdieu^[5], describes how English language proficiency can function as symbolic capital, granting access to prestigious employment and social mobility, reinforcing societal hierarchies. Graduates who lack proficiency in the dominant language forms may face exclusion from high-status roles despite having the technical qualifications, highlighting the social inequalities inherent in language use.

Employability Theory guided the formulation of interview questions targeting transferable and contextual skills, while Human Capital Theory informed the coding of perceived economic value attributed to English skills.

These theories help interpret English proficiency as a multifaceted form of capital, including economic, social, and symbolic dimensions, shaping graduates' employability and the mismatches between university training and industry needs^[13].

Figure 1 illustrates how the three theoretical lenses: Employability Theory^[3], Human Capital Theory^[4], and Bourdieu's^[5] concept of Symbolic Power, interconnect to frame English proficiency as economic, social, and symbolic capital that shapes graduate employability in Malaysia's multilingual workforce.

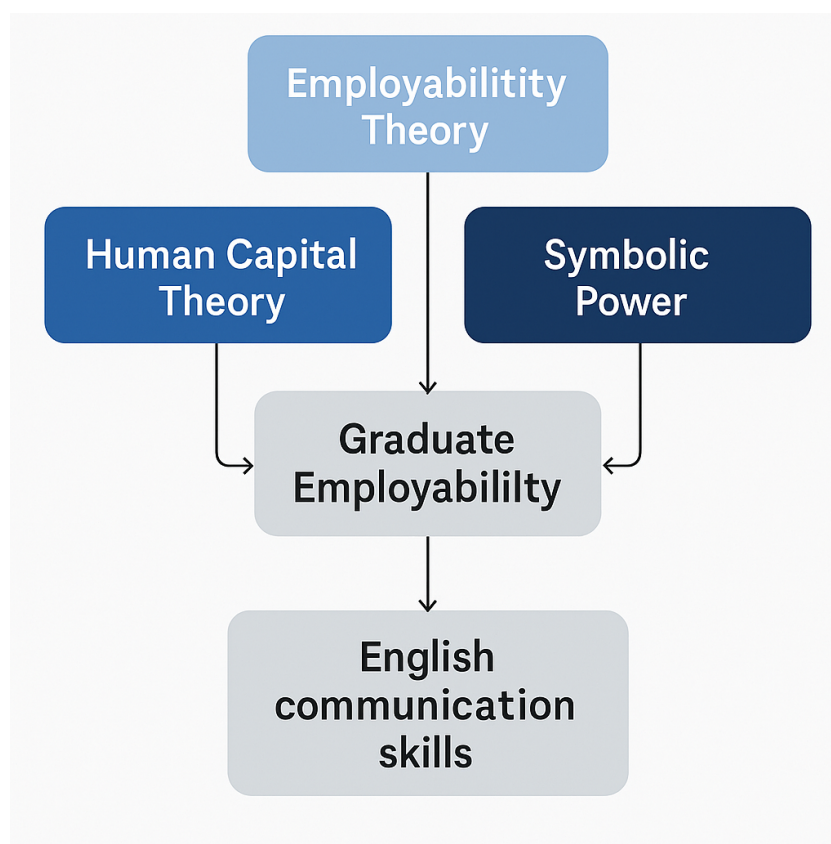


Figure 1. Theoretical Integration of Employability Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Symbolic Power in English Language Education.
(Source: Researchers'-made diagram)

3. Methodology

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design^[22] to examine the alignment and mismatch between employer expectations and graduates' perceptions of English communication skills in Malaysia. The research design was selected to allow qualitative insights from industry experts to inform the development and interpretation of the quantitative survey phase.

The research process consisted of two distinct phases:

- (1) Qualitative interviews with human resource (HR) professionals;
- (2) A quantitative survey administered to diploma and degree-level students at two Malaysian universities.

3.1. Phase One: Qualitative Interviews

The first phase involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six HR managers from various industries known for their active graduate hiring and diverse English communication demands. These included oil and gas, electrical

engineering, legal services, banking, hospitality, and electronics manufacturing. Participants were identified using purposive sampling to ensure maximum variation across sectors and job roles.

The interview protocol explored three key areas: the essential communication skills expected of graduates; common gaps identified between graduate preparedness and workplace communication needs; and recommendations for enhancing English language training at the tertiary education level.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted in English via online conferencing platforms due to pandemic-related constraints. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's^[23] six-phase framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and write-up. Manual coding was employed, and codes were reviewed iteratively across interviews to ensure consistency and to achieve thematic saturation, which was reached by the sixth interview. Themes were validated through investi-

gator triangulation where two researchers independently reviewed the themes and reconciled any discrepancies through

discussion. A summary of participants' demographic and professional profiles is presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Employers' Demographic Information.

Pseudonym	Years	Position	Industry
R1	23+	Senior Manager	Oil & Gas
R2	18	Manager	Electrical Engineering
R3	20	Managing Partner, Legal Firm	Legal
R4	30+	HR Manager	Banking
R5	20+	HR Manager	Hospitality
R6	25+	HR Manager	Manufacturing (Electronics)

3.2. Phase 2: Quantitative Survey

In the second phase, quantitative data from undergraduate and diploma-level students were examined to explore their perceptions of English communication in the workplace. To analyze RQ1, graduates' responses were categorized into key themes (e.g., fluency, confidence, presentation skills), with frequencies and percentages calculated to identify the most prominent gaps between university training and employer expectations. For RQ2, data were divided into three groups: High Expectation, Moderate Expectation, and Neutral/Unclear — to simplify statistical analysis. Statements indicating basic or average ability were classified as *Moderate Expectation*, while those highlighting fluency and confident communication were classified as *High Expectation*. *Neutral/Unclear* responses referred to those left blank or lacking a clear position. RQ3 assessed the perceived value of English communication in professional settings by examining expectation levels across several career sectors. Response frequencies and percentages were computed using Excel's statistical functions (e.g., COUNTIF, SUM), and trends in employer expectations (e.g., fluency, confidence) were compiled in pivot tables to identify patterns efficiently. The student sample consisted of 94 diploma and undergraduate students from one public and one private Malaysian university. The sample included a balanced gender representation of 47.9% male and 52.1% female, ensuring institutional and gender diversity.

For the validity of the quantitative data, two language instructors who are also the main author's colleagues conducted an expert assessment of the questionnaire. This was necessary to determine its content validity and ensure the open-ended item is aligned with workplace English communication demands. Meanwhile, another colleague of the

principal investigator independently examined the student replies to increase the reliability of the results. The accuracy and consistency of the interpreted themes on graduates' perceptions of employer expectations were confirmed by this review procedure.

4. Results

4.1. Employer Expectations for English Communication

This section addresses RQ1: What are employers' expectations of English communication skills among graduates in the workplace?

Thematic analysis of interview data with HR personnel from various sectors revealed recurring insights into employers' expectations for English communication skills among graduates. Five themes emerged from the data, reflecting a shift from traditional views of language competence toward a more practical, workplace-oriented understanding of English proficiency. Interviewees are identified by respondent codes (e.g., R1, R4) to ensure confidentiality.

4.1.1. Clarity Over Complexity

Employers consistently emphasized that clarity of communication was non-negotiable for workplace effectiveness. R4, a senior HR manager in the banking sector, explained that an employee's ability to convey a message clearly, even with minor grammatical errors, was more valuable than the use of "bombastic vocabulary" or an attempt to mimic native-speaker accents. This aligns with Pillai et al.^[24], who argue that intelligibility, not linguistic sophistication, is the communicative currency of the workplace.

R1, from the agriculture sector, added that employees who communicate with clarity help accelerate decision-

making and enhance coordination, which directly impacts team productivity and client satisfaction. R6, from the manufacturing industry, stressed the importance of clear written instructions for effective cross-shift coordination, especially in multilingual teams with varying levels of English proficiency.

4.1.2. Adapting Communication to Context

A second theme involved the ability to adapt communication style to suit different workplace contexts. R5, an HR manager in the hospitality industry, observed that many graduates struggle with tone, often defaulting to overly casual expressions with senior staff or using overly formal language with peers—resulting in awkward interactions. This issue was particularly acute in sectors with international clients, such as hospitality and banking, where tone misjudgements can compromise intercultural professionalism and erode client trust.

4.1.3. Communicative Confidence as a Professional Competency

Confidence in using spoken English emerged as a vital marker of workplace readiness. Several employers reported that graduates often possess adequate linguistic knowledge but refrain from speaking due to fear of making mistakes. R3, a managing partner in a legal firm, highlighted that courtroom settings demand not only precise English but also composure and clarity under pressure, as even minor linguistic errors can lead to significant legal misinterpretations. These observations align with Zaharim et al.^[25], who link communicative confidence with professional credibility, particularly in high-stakes roles like negotiation and legal advocacy.

Some respondents attributed this lack of confidence to exam-centric educational systems, where students are rarely given opportunities to practice spoken English in authentic or high-pressure contexts.

4.1.4. Functional English Over Formal Accuracy

Across all sectors, employers emphasized that the ability to communicate clearly and appropriately in real-world situations is more valuable than using grammatically perfect English. R6, a senior HR manager in manufacturing, explained, “We don’t expect flawless English. We need people who can give instructions clearly so that no time is wasted trying to guess what was meant.” Similarly, R4,

from the banking industry, stated, “Clarity is more important than sounding like a native speaker. We value concise, well-structured messages, especially in emails and chats.” This conciseness can be fostered by digital collaboration solutions that allow for peer editing in real time in virtual work settings^[26].

These comments reflect a shared preference for functional English—language that is purpose-driven, situationally appropriate, and effective—over formal linguistic accuracy. Several respondents expressed frustration when graduates, although technically proficient in grammar, struggled to convey ideas during meetings or adapt tone to the audience. As R5 from hospitality observed, “It’s not about being textbook correct; it’s about knowing how to talk to different people—clients, colleagues, or guests.”

This thematic pattern reinforces the need for university instruction to move away from exam-oriented grammar drills and instead focus on pragmatic communication, role-plays, and real-time language use in workplace contexts.

4.1.5. Bridging the Expectation Gap: Employers vs. Graduates

A cross-cutting theme throughout the interviews was the mismatch between employer expectations and graduate perceptions. While employers value clarity, adaptability, and confidence, many graduates mistakenly believe that grammatical correctness and fluency are the top priorities. This misalignment may stem from a lack of explicit messaging in university curricula.

As R5 noted, “They think we want perfect English, but it’s actually about knowing how to adjust to the audience and still sound confident.” This perception reflects what Bourdieu^[5] describes as symbolic power, where graduates conflate linguistic purity with social capital, often at the expense of pragmatic competence.

4.2. Graduate Perceptions and Self-Assessed Preparedness

This section addresses Research Question 2 (RQ2): What are graduates’ beliefs regarding employer expectations of English communication skills?

Thematic and descriptive analysis of survey data from 94 undergraduate and diploma-level students reveals several patterns in student beliefs, perceived readiness, and skill

development needs. These findings are organized into key themes that mirror employer priorities in Section 4.1, enabling a direct comparison between what employers expect and how graduates evaluate their own competencies and preparation.

English Skills Needing Improvement for Industry Readiness

This section addresses Research Question 2: *What are graduates' beliefs regarding employer expectations of English communication skills?* As shown in **Table 3**, a significant majority of respondents (84.0%) identified speaking as the most critical area for improvement, particularly in terms of fluency, clear pronunciation, confident delivery, and the ability to communicate ideas effectively during meetings and professional interactions. The results demonstrate that graduates believe employers place the highest value on speaking abilities. As stated by 44.6% of participants, listening skills are also necessary for understanding others, following directions, and having conversations. Writing abilities, such as clearly crafting business emails and re-

ports, were mentioned by 23.4% of graduates, suggesting a moderate level of relevance. The least emphasis was paid to reading skills, with only 10.6% identifying technical vocabulary and the capacity to understand written documents as priorities. The results indicate that graduates recognize that while reading and writing abilities are regarded differently across industries, employers consistently place a higher priority on effective oral communication, especially speaking and listening.

The insights gathered from graduates are further contextualized by employer feedback, which reveals concrete directions for curriculum enhancement. However, several responses still emphasized grammatical accuracy and formal structure, suggesting that many students equate proficiency with correctness rather than functional communicative competence. This finding reflects a perception gap noted by employers.

To clearly highlight the misalignment between employer expectations and graduate beliefs, the key contrasts are summarized in **Table 4** below.

Table 3. Graduate-Identified English Skills Gaps for Employment.

English Skills	Frequency (n)	Percentage(%)	Industry Expectations as Perceived by Graduates
Speaking	79	84.0	Fluency, clear pronunciation, confident communication, ability to present ideas and speak in meetings
Listening	44	44.6	Ability to understand others, follow instructions, engage in conversations
Writing	22	23.4	Writing professional emails, reports, clarity in written communication
Reading	10	10.6	Understanding written documents, technical vocabulary, comprehending work-related texts

Table 4. Comparative Matrix of Employer vs Graduate Expectations on English Communication.

Skill/Focus Area	Employers Emphasize	Graduates Focus On	Gap Identified
Clarity and Conciseness	Highly valued even with minor grammatical errors.	Less emphasized; more focus on grammar accuracy.	Graduates underestimate the importance of being clearly understood.
Spoken Confidence	Considered essential for meetings, presentations, and client interactions.	Report fear of speaking or low confidence despite sufficient knowledge.	Lack of real-world practice reduces confidence in high-pressure contexts.
Tone and Context Adaptation	Must vary speech depending on audience (e.g., clients, bosses, colleagues).	Often unaware of tone shifts, tend to use formal or casual language inappropriately.	Graduates are unclear on how tone and register affect professionalism.
Fluency and Accuracy	Functional fluency preferred over native-like or perfect grammar.	Strong emphasis on grammatical correctness and accent.	Misalignment in how fluency is defined and valued.
Listening Skills	Important for teamwork, understanding instructions, and workplace efficiency.	Recognized by graduates but often secondary to speaking and writing.	Graduates undervalue listening as a core part of communication.
Written Communication	Must be clear, concise, and appropriate for emails, memos, and reports.	Acknowledged, but seen as less urgent than mastering grammar.	Graduates may lack exposure to actual workplace writing conventions.

4.3. Curriculum Recommendations Based on Industry Feedback

This section addresses Research Question 3 (RQ3): *How can university English language courses be improved to align more closely with the needs of employers?* Drawing on qualitative data from employer interviews and reinforced by graduate survey responses, this section highlights key curriculum reforms and pedagogical strategies needed to enhance the practical relevance of English language education for employability. The feedback provided by HR professionals offers targeted, sector-specific insights that go beyond general academic skills and point toward the need for authentic, workplace-oriented communication training.

Employer feedback largely reinforced graduate perceptions, while offering deeper insights into how English should be taught for workplace readiness. Across sectors, HR professionals emphasized the need for contextual, industry-specific communication rather than general academic exercises. As one manufacturing-sector manager explained:

“We need graduates who can report incidents, summarize procedures, and email suppliers...not write essays.” – R6, Manufacturing

In the legal and hospitality sectors, employers highlighted the importance of audience-sensitive oral communication, particularly in high-stakes or culturally diverse interactions:

“Precision in speech is everything. One word can alter meaning entirely in court.” – R3, Legal

“It’s not just speaking...it’s knowing how to speak differently to a guest, a boss, or a cleaner.” – R5, Hospitality

Another key concern was the lack of confidence-building opportunities in current curricula. Employers observed that graduates often freeze when asked to present or speak spontaneously in meetings.

“They understand English, but many freeze up when asked to present or speak in a meeting.” – HR Officer

To address these gaps, employers advocated for au-

thentic, workplace-based training such as role-plays, simulations, and presentation tasks. This would foster the linguistic agility, confidence, and adaptability required in professional environments.

“Speaking isn’t just about fluency — it’s about knowing how to contribute in meetings, present ideas clearly, and handle real client interactions.” – R4, Banking

These recommendations indicate that while graduates understand the general importance of English, existing university programs must evolve to prioritize practical communication strategies tailored to real-world demands.

5. Discussion

This section discusses findings in relation to the three research questions posed in the study. It interprets the data presented in Section 4 and connects them to existing literature.

5.1. Employers Prioritize Functionality Over Formality (RQ1)

These insights address Research Question 1 and are grounded in the employer perspectives detailed in Section 4.1. English proficiency functions as a form of both human and symbolic capital^[4,5]. Employers across sectors consistently prioritize clarity, confidence, adaptability, and situational tone over perfect grammar or native-like fluency, as these qualities reflect functional, workplace-relevant communication. This emphasis aligns closely with Employability Theory, which highlights the importance of contextual and transferable competencies for graduate success^[3].

Higher education institutions must reframe English not as a discrete academic subject, but as a cross-disciplinary professional skill critical to career development. This study further validates the theoretical framework by demonstrating how English operates simultaneously as an economic asset (Human Capital), a gatekeeping mechanism for opportunity and advancement (Symbolic Power), and a tool for navigating diverse and dynamic workplace contexts (Employability Theory).

5.2. Graduate Mismatch: Root Causes and Implications (RQ2)

This section responds to Research Question 2, by interpreting graduates' perceptions of employer expectations, as derived from the quantitative and qualitative data presented in the results above. From the findings, it is evident that graduates recognize employers across different sectors expect strong English communication skills, particularly fluency, grammatical accuracy, and effective presentation abilities^[27,28]. Employers emphasized the need for not just educational proficiency, but also practical communication skills tailored to office settings. These include competencies such as report writing, summarizing information, composing professional emails and memos, and speaking clearly in high-pressure social and professional contexts^[29,30].

Several employers also expressed concern that educational institutions continue to prioritize academic grades over real-world preparedness, which is a key contributor to the communication gap^[31,32]. This overemphasis on examination performance leaves graduates ill-equipped for the practical demands of workplace communication. A significant gap persists between academic education and industry expectations, especially in the realm of applied communication skills. As a result, greater attention must be given to training students to speak and present confidently under pressure, mirroring real-life professional scenarios^[33].

Graduates themselves echoed this need, stating that oral communication — particularly listening and speaking should be prioritized over reading and writing within university English programs. While all four skills remain important, listening and speaking were considered more essential for meeting employer demands and fostering interpersonal effectiveness in the workplace^[34,35].

To bridge this gap, it is crucial to embed authentic workplace communication tasks into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. Activities such as report writing, client interactions, and team briefings can help students internalize what “effective English” entails in real-world contexts^[24]. Furthermore, institutions must establish stronger partnerships with industry stakeholders to ensure that English language curricula evolve in response to changing professional communication needs^[13]. These perception mismatches, compounded by outdated instructional methods, underscore the urgency for curricular alignment, a theme

explored further in Sections 5.3 to 5.5.

5.3. Oral Communication: The Most Critical but Underserved Skill (RQ2 and RQ3)

This discussion further elaborates on Research Questions 2 and 3, referencing findings from **Table 3** and the results in 4.2 which underscore the centrality of oral communication across professional contexts. The findings confirm that English language expectations vary across industries, reflecting distinct communicative demands. These differences expose the limitations of generic English curricula in preparing graduates for the complex realities of globalized workplaces.

In hospitality, employers emphasized interpersonal fluency, politeness, empathy, and intercultural awareness as critical to service delivery^[36]. In banking, clarity in professional correspondence was essential for trust and precision^[37]. The manufacturing sector valued concise technical reporting and clear instruction^[38], while the legal field prioritized rhetorical control and precision in high-stakes oral interactions^[39].

These findings support long-standing research on the contextual nature of workplace communication^[40,41] and reinforce calls by ESP scholars for curriculum design grounded in real communicative events^[42]. Effective communication depends not just on language accuracy but on audience awareness, task relevance, and cross-cultural sensitivity.

Given this variation, a one-size-fits-all approach to English instruction is no longer viable. Universities should embed modular, sector-specific ESP components such as Legal English, Business Communication, and Technical Writing within academic programs. These modules should simulate authentic workplace tasks to develop functional, industry-relevant competence.

Employer dissatisfaction with overly academic English training^[43,44] further justifies this shift. A tailored ESP framework aligns more closely with employability goals by addressing both transferable and applied communication skills. To ensure relevance, these modules must be co-designed with industry stakeholders and informed by robust needs analyses.

Moreover, studies have shown that language acquisition can be successfully supported by technology-enhanced learning, especially when it comes to digital resources^[45].

Early exposure to digital platforms such as YouTube shows how technology-assisted language acquisition at the basic level becomes a crucial facilitator of career advancement and professional preparedness^[46]. Such strategies serve as both skill-enhancing interventions and financially sound investments when applied to postsecondary education through sector-specific language training—a dual role highlighted by Human Capital Theory^[4]. This progression from fundamental digital literacy to expert communication skills intentionally raises learners' market value while meeting business demands.

5.4. From Academic English to Workplace Literacy

This section continues the discussion of Research Question 3 by synthesizing insights from both employer and graduate perspectives from the preceding results. It explores the broader disconnect between academic English instruction and real-world communicative demands in the workplace. Graduates reported feeling underprepared for real-world communication, particularly in speaking and adapting language to different professional settings. These findings reflect Piekari et al.'s concept of the "language wall," where formal language competence does not translate into workplace success^[20].

While universities often emphasize grammar and academic writing, employers prioritize clarity, audience awareness, and spoken confidence. Malaysian employers, as noted by Ting et al.^[31], may accept moderate proficiency if graduates can communicate effectively, especially in team and client-facing contexts. Yet students often equate employability with mastering grammar, not with interpersonal competence — an assumption that remains misaligned with industry needs^[27].

Jawing and Kamlun^[35] found a strong link between language proficiency and employability, advocating for better alignment between university instruction and employer expectations. Studies by Talif and Noor^[47] and Nguyen^[48] similarly highlight how academic curricula often neglect basic workplace tasks like writing emails or leading discussions.

To bridge this gap, English instruction must be reframed as workplace literacy — practical, adaptable, and digitally informed. This means embedding real-life tasks like

presentations and client interactions into language modules, alongside digital communication training and AI-assisted writing tools such as ChatGPT. Used critically, such tools can support students' development without fostering dependency. Ultimately, meaningful reform will require curriculum redesign, faculty retraining, and stronger university–industry collaboration. Learning Management Systems (LMS) platforms that provide centralized access to workplace communication modules, such as Blackboard^[49], may help with this shift.

5.5. ESP as a Solution to Industry-Specific Language Demands

This section integrates findings relevant to Research Questions 1 and 3, drawing on employer perspectives and graduate feedback in Sections 4.1. and 4.2. to highlight the need for industry-aligned English instruction. Employers in fields such as hospitality, manufacturing, banking, and law highlighted distinct communicative competencies essential for workplace success. While students recognised the importance of oral fluency, many reported a disconnect between their classroom experiences and the nuanced demands of their target industry. For instance, intercultural empathy and polite interaction were valued in hospitality; technical precision and clarity were central in manufacturing; the banking sector prioritised email etiquette and digital communication; and the legal profession required persuasive and contextually appropriate discourse.

These findings align with Employability Theory^[3], which posits that employability is not solely dependent on academic achievement but also on transferable skills such as communication, adaptability, and self-confidence. English language proficiency, in this context, becomes a key enabler of workplace readiness and career progression. Simultaneously, Human Capital Theory^[4] frames language skills as a strategic investment that increases an individual's economic value in the labour market. Sector-specific language training, therefore, functions as both a skill-enhancing and economically rational pursuit.

In response, a modular English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach tailored to diverse professional contexts is essential^[50,51]. Embedding courses such as Legal English, Business English, Technical Writing, and Intercultural Communication into university curricula can bridge

the gap between academic preparation and real-world performance. Such an approach not only enhances employability and labour market competitiveness but also promotes equity by ensuring all students have access to the communicative tools valued in their chosen fields.

5.6. Aligning Language Education with Policy and Equity Goals (Synthesis of RQ1–RQ3)

This final section draws together insights from across Research Questions 1 to 3, providing a broader reflection on how the findings — particularly those in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 — relate to national education policies and employability goals. Despite the progressive aspirations of national frameworks such as the Graduate Employability Blueprint, the English Language Roadmap 2015–2025, the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (SPV2030), and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), this study reveals a persistent gap between policy rhetoric and institutional implementation. Recent research on academic work environments also that the success of curriculum change is greatly impacted by institutional support networks and faculty workload demands^[12]. Moreover, stakeholder feedback indicates that current university practices inadequately address the sector-specific and situational

communication competencies required in today’s workplace.

From a Human Capital Theory^[4] perspective, this lack of alignment represents a missed opportunity to enhance the economic value of graduates. Without strategic investments in communicative competencies that reflect workplace realities, students remain underprepared, and the return on their educational investment is diminished both for individuals and for the national economy. Furthermore, Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic power^[5] highlights how policy blind spots in language education risk reinforcing existing inequalities. Proficiency in dominant linguistic codes — particularly professional English — acts as cultural capital that affords access to prestige, employment, and mobility. When curricula do not democratise access to these forms of capital, they inadvertently privilege students already socialised into such discourse, thus undermining the equity ambitions of SPV2030 and SDG 4.

To visualise the progression from reform to national impact, **Figure 2** presents a staircase model showing how enhanced English communication skills driven by curriculum reform lead to desirable graduate outcomes. These outcomes respond to industry-specific needs and ultimately contribute to national development agendas, including employability, equity, and SDG 4.

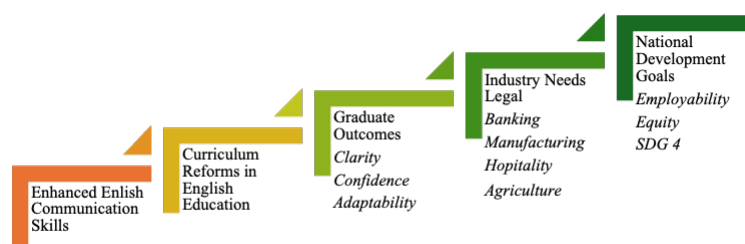


Figure 2. Staircase Model Linking Curriculum Reform to Graduate Outcomes, Sectoral Needs, and National Development Goals.

Addressing this disconnect calls for a systemic and theoretically informed transformation. Institutions must move beyond top-down policy compliance and toward inclusive, market-responsive curriculum reform. Embedding employer engagement mechanisms such as advisory boards, curriculum panels, and internship-linked assessments can help ensure continuous alignment with real-world communicative demands. These reforms support a more equitable and functional language education system, where employability is enhanced not only as an economic outcome but also as a

socially transformative goal.

5.7. Study Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the alignment of English language education with employability demands, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of six HR professionals and 94 student participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study re-

lied on self-reported data, particularly from students, which could be subject to social desirability bias or misperception. Third, sectoral representation, while diverse, may still overlook communication nuances in underrepresented industries such as healthcare or education. Future research should consider expanding the sample and including longitudinal data to capture evolving communication needs in the Malaysian workforce.

6. Conclusions

This study highlights a critical disconnect between employer expectations and graduates' English communication skills within Malaysia's multilingual workforce. While employers prioritize clarity, adaptability, and spoken confidence, graduates often equate proficiency with grammatical accuracy. This reveals a persistent mismatch in perceptions. Sector-wide findings further emphasize that communication requirements are highly contextual, shaped by specific industry demands.

These findings underscore the urgent need to reform English language instruction in Malaysian universities. Embedding industry-relevant modules, fostering authentic workplace communication, and integrating digital and AI-driven tools can reposition English as more than just a medium of instruction — as a vital professional asset. Such curricular reforms are essential to narrowing the education-employment divide and advancing national priorities, particularly those linked to SPV2030 and SDG 4.

To bridge this gap, English education must evolve from an academic exercise to a practice-oriented, career-focused skill set. Innovative methods and video resumes can enhance student engagement while simulating workplace expectations^[46]. Additionally, initiatives like workplace simulations, role-playing, internships, and industry collaborations can offer students direct exposure to professional communication contexts. Together, these strategies will better align graduate competencies with employer needs and strengthen Malaysia's global workforce readiness.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, Z.A. and S.K.B.; methodology, Z.A. and S.K.B.; software, Z.A. and S.K.B.; validation, Z.A. and S.K.B.; formal analysis, Z.A. and S.K.B.; investiga-

tion, Z.A. and S.K.B.; resources, Z.A., S.K.B., S.M., R.M. and A.Z.M.L.; data curation, A.Q.N.A. and A.S.J.; writing—original draft preparation, Z.A., S.K.B., S.M., R.M. and A.Z.M.L.; writing—review and editing, Z.A., S.K.B., S.M., R.M. and A.Z.M.L.; visualization, Z.A., S.K.B., S.M., R.M. and A.Z.M.L.; supervision, Z.A. and S.K.B.; project administration, Z.A. and S.K.B.; funding acquisition, Z.A. and S.K.B..

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because it involved minimal risk, consisted solely of voluntary participation by adult respondents, and collected no personally identifiable or sensitive data. All participants were informed of the study's purpose and their rights, and consent was obtained prior to data collection in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent Statement

Each participant gave his/her informed consent for the study. Participants gave their written consent electronically via a Google Form at the start of the data collecting procedure for the survey component. Verbal consent was acquired for the qualitative interviews following a thorough description of the study's goals, methods, and participants' rights.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Survey Instrument

Section A: Demographic Information

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your level of study?
4. What year of study are you currently in?
5. What type of university are you attending?
6. What is your faculty or field of study?
7. How would you rate your overall English proficiency?

Section B: Perceptions of English Use in the Workplace

1. How important do you think English communication skills are for getting a job in your field?
2. Which English skills do you think employers value the most?
3. How confident are you in using English in the following situations?
 - a. Speaking during meetings or presentations
 - b. Writing professional emails
 - c. Understanding spoken instructions
 - d. Reading formal documents
4. Which English skills do you feel you need to improve the most for the workplace?
5. Do you believe improving your English skills will increase your chances of promotion at work?
6. My university English courses have prepared me well for real workplace communication.
7. What kind of English training would help you feel more confident at work?

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