

EMPLOYERS' VIEWS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND COMMUNICATION SKILL FOR EMPLOYABILITY IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Employability of graduates is a concern in many countries, including Malaysia, and the high unemployment rate among graduates is often attributed to their lack of English proficiency and communication skills. These two distinctive elements are often collated, and it is important to find out which is more important to employers. The study examined the employers' views on the importance of English proficiency and communication skill for graduates to be employed in the Malaysian private sector. The data were from semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 employers in the private sector who were in the position to recruit staff. The 21,433-word interview transcripts were analyzed. The results revealed that employers in the Malaysian private sector view language proficiency and communication skills as separate qualities. The employers are willing to consider employing candidates with average English proficiency if they have good communication skills, except for jobs which require more communication in English such as customer service and marketing. The results also revealed that good communication skills can increase employability and opportunities for career advancement. The findings highlight the communication skills that universities need to emphasize so that their graduates have the necessary skills to perform well in employment interviews and in their work.

Keywords: English proficiency; communication skill; graduate employability; Malaysia; private sector

Employability of graduates is a concern in many countries, and Malaysia is no exception as shown by a report by the Department of Statistics of Malaysia:

The unemployment rate in Malaysia was recorded at 3.2 percent in August of 2015, remaining steady from the preceding month and matching market forecasts. ... Unemployment rate in Malaysia averaged 3.26 percent from 1998 until 2015, reaching an all time high of 4.50 percent in March of 1999 and a record low of 2.70 percent in August of 2012. (Trading Economics, 2015)

Research has identified some reasons for the high unemployment rate in Malaysia, among which is unrealistic salary expectation. A JobStreet.com survey on graduate employment in Malaysia conducted in November 2011 involving 1,830 respondents revealed that graduates were asking for too high a salary (JobStreet, 2015). The bachelor degree holders expected a salary level between RM1,800 and RM2,600 for the bachelor's degree holders (73%) whereas the diploma holders expected a salary level between RM1,200 and RM1,800 (67%). In fact, 29% of the respondents had rejected a job offer because the salary and

benefits were below their expectation. The survey found that in reality only 54% of the bachelor's degree holders received the expected salary level of RM1,800 - RM2,600. Another 35% received a salary below RM1,800. The results also showed that diploma holders were more likely to be employed than degree holders. Based on their survey of human resource executives, Jayasingam, Fujiwara, and Thurasamy (2016) stated that highly competent candidates could afford to be choosy about their jobs and it might not have adverse effects on their employability.

However, the high unemployment rate among graduates is often attributed to their lack of English proficiency and communication skills. In the workplace context, good communication skills refer to the ability to transmit and receive information clearly, and include the ability to read the audience in order to avoid and resolve conflicts (Kermode, 2017). In Malaysia, feedback from stakeholders in the private sector, reported in the mass media (e.g., Aruna, 2011; Teoh, 2011), indicate that graduates do not have the necessary language and communication skills for workplace communication. Consequently, they cannot speak English properly or are not

confident when making oral presentations (Yasin, Shaupil, Mukhtar, Ab Ghani, & Rashid, 2010). A study by Singh and Singh (2008) in the Klang Valley showed that graduates and employers concur on the importance of English proficiency and communicative ability for graduate employability. The rankings of importance are as follows: 1) adaptability skills, 2) interpersonal and teamwork skills, 3) time management skills, 4) English language proficiency, 5) information communication technology skills, 6) leadership skills, and 7) communication skills. In fact, employers in the private sector would rather employ graduates from transnational private universities because of their better command of English although graduates from Malaysian public universities are familiar with local conditions, diligent, and have lower salary expectations (Cheong, Hill, Fernandez-Chung, & Leong, 2016). Malaysian university students are aware that poor language proficiency can hamper communicative ability, but do not agree that a good mastery of English would automatically imbue one with the ability to speak with confidence and converse in an interactive and knowledgeable (Marzuki, Ting, Jerome, Chuah, & Misieng, 2013).

From the mass media reports and research papers on graduate unemployment, it is clear that it is important for graduates to have good communication skills and English proficiency to get employed. These two skills are often mentioned together as if they are one element but some researchers like Singh and Singh (2008) view them as separate elements. In this paper, we show that the employers' views of communication skills and language proficiency concur with the literature on the two being related but distinctive elements, and they hold different values depending on type of job and company.

The study examined the employers' views on the importance of English proficiency and communication skill for graduates to be employed in the Malaysian private sector. The specific aspects studied were: (1) the importance of communication skills in the private sector; (2) the importance of English proficiency in the private sector; and (3) the relative importance of communication skills and English proficiency. The communication skill referred to in this paper is oral communication skill, and the focus is on English proficiency.

In the rest of this paper, the related literature on how English proficiency and communication skill relate to employability is reviewed before the theoretical framework of the study is explained. Next, the methodology and results are described. The results are discussed in relation to the literature and conclusions are drawn.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, institutions of higher education have begun to focus on employability but this does not

have a well-defined scope for the industry, academics, government agencies and students. Employability encompasses skills and attributes that enable fresh graduates to secure jobs and those who are already employed to maintain or advance in their career. "This involves possessing particular knowledge, skills and attitudes with an ability to deploy them and market them to employers" (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011, p. 6). Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, and Zehner's (2013) study in Canada found that when employers hired new graduates, they place the highest importance on soft-skills and the lowest importance on academic reputation, the other categories being problem-solving skills, functional skills, pre-graduation skills and academic reputation.

Among the soft skills, communication skill has received more attention in the context of employability. Core communication skills are identified as "inter-alia, making presentations, taking part in technical discourse, confidently explaining and justifying actions, processes and decisions to co-workers and line-managers and communicating effectively across a multi-cultural/multi-national workforce" by employers in the Gulf States (Thomas, Piquette, & McMaster, 2016, p. 2). A survey by National Association of Colleges on 219 employers in the United States showed that communication skill was the most sought-after skill in graduates and yet it was the skill that is most lacking in fresh graduates (DuPre & Williams, 2011). The US graduates in this survey were aware that good communication skill is among the top five skills wanted by their future employers. Robles (2012) confirms that communication skill is among the top 10 soft skills perceived as the most important by business executives in the United States, comprising integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic. Similar findings were obtained in Australia, where employers were of the view that many graduates were lacking in generic skills including communicative abilities despite possessing excellent academic results (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragnolini, 2004). In Thailand, Pattanaoichet and Chinokul (2011) found that most future employers in the public relations sector did not recruit local university graduates because of their lack of confidence to communicate in English. Communication skills are also important in the engineering profession in Australia. "Given that communication is ranked as one of the prime characteristics required by employers in the engineering industry, EQ [emotional intelligence] has an important role to play in strengthening communication skills when certain EQ elements are enhanced in the student" (Riemer, 2002, p. 98). However, there are some exceptions to these findings. Employers in Kuwait valued knowledge

more than soft skills for business graduates (Abdulla, Naser, & Saeid, 2014). Among the soft skills, computing and numerical skills topped the list, and oral communication skill ranked 7 out of 9. Other than Abdulla et al. (2014), other studies have shown the primary importance of communication skill to graduate employability.

Past research studies have also pointed to the value of good language proficiency to employees, particularly English. English is the lingua franca of the commercial sphere with more businesses going global. Since interviews are mostly conducted in English, employers often form judgements of the interviewees' ability based on their ability to speak English (Pandey & Pandey, 2014). Pandey and Pandey (2014) stated that an employee with brilliant ideas and poor English will stay at the bottom of the management ladder. In view of this, Pooja (2013) asserts that the lecturers teaching English have the responsibility "to build real competencies to bridge the gap between corporate needs and institutional offerings" (p. 351). However, Canning (2009) believes that academics should not promote the view that modern language degrees would enable graduates to develop competence in two or more languages and hence increase their chances of employability. Although Pandey and Pandey (2014) and Pooja (2013) were both writing about the importance of English for employability in India, the situations described are similar in Malaysia as both countries were previously under British rule before their independence. Using the Australian Graduate Survey data from 2010 to 2012, Poon's (2016) analysis revealed that English proficiency has a statistically significant impact on employment outcomes and patterns for the 1,258 real estate and 9,206 built environment graduates. Degree levels affect employment patterns of real estate graduates whereas age and gender affected those of built environment graduates. Poon (2016) reported that the employment rates for real estate and built environment graduates who did not speak English at home were low, 11.00 and 16.08 percent respectively. This group of Australian permanent residents is likely to be from families with immigrant backgrounds, and English proficiency affected their chances of securing employment. In the United States, English language proficiency affects earnings of immigrants (Fleisher, Li, & Li, 2015). English proficiency may not be an issue for native speakers of English but for non-native speakers of English, English proficiency is an advantage for securing employment and career advancement.

Theoretical framework of the study

As language proficiency and communication skill are often mentioned together in relation to graduate employability in the Malaysian setting whether in mass media reports (Aruna, 2011; Teoh, 2011) or

research publications (Marzuki et al., 2013; Singh & Singh, 2008; Yasin et al., 2010), the relationship between these two constructs form the theoretical framework of the study. This section reviews the literature on the definition of these constructs from two different disciplines, language teaching and communication, to reach a better understanding of the relationship between language proficiency and communication skill.

Language proficiency is the goal of language teaching. Put generally, the goal of language teaching is to enable language learners to take part in the "normal give-and-take of target language conversation" (Lowe, 1983, p. 238). Lowe's (1983) definition focuses on oral proficiency, which is also the focal point of ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages)/ETS (English Language Testing Service) Proficiency Guidelines. ACTFL/ETS is a "proficiency-oriented curriculum" (Kramsch, 1986, p. 366) which is very influential in the United States and Great Britain respectively (van Lier, 1989).

The proficiency-oriented curriculum is underpinned by three beliefs on the nature and purpose of language learning, which are: (1) learning a language is learning how to use it, (2) "language is bound to its situational context and to what [the topic or content] is being communicated in that context", and (3) grammatical accuracy is of paramount importance in developing language proficiency (Kramsch, 1986, p. 366). With attention to the function, content, and accuracy in language teaching, then language learners can increase their communicative ability, which is defined as the "ability to function effectively in the language in real-life contexts" (Byrnes, 1984, p. 12).

The ability to use English effectively in the Malaysian setting varies because English is a foreign language to some as it does not have much recognized functions in their daily lives (Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985) and a second language to others because they use them for a range of functions on a daily basis. Nevertheless, within the situational context in which they need to use English, they should be able to function effectively in it. Kramsch (1986) states that the Proficiency Guidelines "implicitly maintain that successful communication will take place if the learners have the required proficiency, i.e., if they know how to put their point across appropriately, precisely, and correctly, and with the required degree of fluency" (p. 370). In other words, better proficiency leads to better communication.

However, critics of the proficiency-oriented curriculum question whether or not language learners are able to function effectively in it. Kramsch (1986) argues that learners who are the products of the proficiency-oriented curriculum may not have interactional competency, not because of the lack of proficiency but because of the lack of

shared realities, for example, “expectations, assumptions, and general representations of the world” (p. 368). This is because learners learn languages to use it for various functions (explained earlier in the three beliefs on the nature and purpose of language learning), and the uses to which a language is put to usually involves interactions with other people. Seldom is a language learnt merely for self-expression without an audience, which is why Kramersch (1986, p. 370) emphasizes the importance of interactional competence.

The notion of an audience is also found in the Proficiency Guidelines’ definition of what successful communication is (speakers know how to put their point across appropriately, precisely, and correctly, and with the required degree of fluency). However, the point cannot be conveyed if the listeners (or readers) do not understand the message because of a different reality or understanding of the world. The speaker’s accuracy and fluency in the language cannot surmount the comprehension barrier caused by the lack of shared realities.

Kramersch (1986) also questioned the accuracy-focus of the proficiency-oriented curriculum and stated that grammatical inaccuracies do not impede communication as much as errors at a discourse level (e.g., not knowing patterns of directness or politeness, and thereby causing insult or offence). In Kramersch’s (1986) view, the Proficiency Guidelines deals with discourse aptitude at a textual level (e.g., use of cohesive devices) but neglects discourse coherence, which includes “entering temporarily someone else’s frame of reference and following the cultural logic of their conversation” (p. 370). This discourse coherence is made possible when the speaker and listener have shared realities which make comprehension possible. In short, the critics of the proficiency-oriented curriculum claim that proficiency in the target language does not automatically bring about interactional competence, which is good communication skill to laypersons.

From proficiency, we move on to communication skill. Communication takes place when information, ideas, attitudes, or emotion are transmitted from one person or group to another via symbols (Theodorson & Theodorson, 1969). Using the information theory, Shannon and Weaver (1949) proposed a communication model which built upon Aristotle’s early model of communication that explains how a message encoded by a speaker is transmitted to the listener. Shannon and Weaver introduced the elements of transmitter and receiver for sending and receiving the message respectively (like the case of a radio transmission), and also the element of noise (e.g., static) which may interfere with the transmission of the message. The model of communication that is more relevant to our investigation of the relationship between language proficiency and communication skill is that developed by Schramm (1954) who studied

communication as an independent discipline (Croft, 2004).

Schramm (1954) highlights the importance of interpersonal communication in his model of communication. He introduced the idea of the fields of experience, that is, the sender of the message encodes the message based on the sender’s field of experience and the receiver of the message decodes it based on the receiver’s field of experience. If they do not share the fields of experience, then a communication breakdown may occur. The more overlap there is between the two fields of experience, the better the communication. For example, sixth graders would not understand a neurophysiology lecture because they do not have the background knowledge of chemistry and biology, much less the specialised knowledge of biochemical processes in the nervous system (Croft, 2004). For a start, Croft (2004) said that the sixth grader audience would lack the vocabulary to make sense of the neurophysiology lecture.

Later Schramm (1954) brought in the idea of feedback, which transforms the notion of the linear transmission of messages to a continuous process of messages and feedback. Figure 1 shows the interaction between the sender and receiver in Schramm’s model of communication.

With the definitions of proficiency and communication established based on the language teaching and communication disciplines, it is time to examine the relationship between these two constructs. Schramm’s (1954) idea of shared fields of experiences between the sender and receiver has some semblance to the element of shared realities highlighted by Kramersch (1986) in her critique of the proficiency-oriented understanding of language proficiency. Both refer to the necessity for the sender and receiver of the message to have some common background knowledge for the message to be successfully communicated. Thus, an essential element of good communication is shared realities (in Kramersch’s words) or shared fields of experiences (in Schramm’s words).

However, shared knowledge is not the only element necessary for successful communication because the message is encoded in a language. The sender and receiver of the message need to share knowledge of the language. This is where proficiency in the language becomes relevant, and poor proficiency on the part of either the sender or receiver can interfere with the communication. On the basis of this reasoning, therefore communication can be presumed to take place when there is shared knowledge of the content and the language, but successful interpersonal communication also requires interactional competency which includes interactional skills (e.g., taking turns, holding and yield the floor, introducing and building topics) and discourse aptitude (see Byrnes, 1984, as cited in Kramersch, 1986, p. 370).

Researchers like Byrnes (1984) are of the view that interactional skills can only be taught to proficient learners. This line of argument leads to the conclusion that language proficiency is essential to develop good communication skill but it begs the question of who is considered proficient speakers, and this also depends on the situational contexts in which the language is used and the functions of the communication (refer to the three beliefs underpinning the proficiency-oriented curriculum as explained by Kramsch, 1986). A good mastery of

the language means that the speaker has the means to articulate their shared fields of experience to the listener but we posit that so long as language proficiency does not fall below a certain threshold level, it is possible for speakers to learn good communication skills and develop interactional competency – and the threshold level depends on the situational contexts in which the language is used and the functions of the communication. The process is depicted in Figure 1.

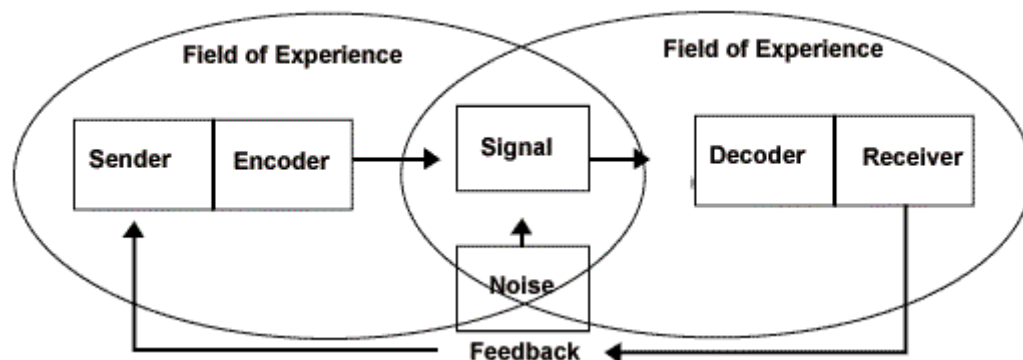


Figure 1. Schramm's (1954) model of communication
(Source: http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/cai/lectures/schramm.files/slide0006_image008.gif)

METHOD

Participants

The data for this paper were from semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 employers in the private sector who were in the position to recruit staff. The companies were an animation company, a bank, a pharmaceutical company, a telecommunication company, a mobile app development company, an oil and gas company, a construction company, and three insurance companies. Table 1 shows the position of the employers and the nature of business of the company. Further details on the background of the employers and nature of business cannot be

provided to preserve the anonymity of the participants and the company.

Data collection and analysis

The second and third researchers made appointments to meet the employers in their office for the interviews. Attempts had been made to seek consent from other employers for the interviews using official and informal means but many requests were turned down. Therefore, these interview data are valuable and contain insights which reveal how stakeholders view two much-highlighted qualities of university graduates seeking employment: language proficiency, and communication skill.

Table 1. Position of employers interviewed

Pseudonym used in the paper	Position of employer in the company	Nature of business of the company
P1	Chief Executive Office	Animation company
P2	Human Capital Business Relationship Executive	Multinational bank
P3	Senior General Manager of Sales and Marketing Division	Pharmaceutical firm
P4	Chief Marketing Officer	Malaysian insurance firm
P5	Talent and Development Manager	Asia-Pacific insurance firm
P6	Chief Human Capital Officer	Telecommunications firm
P7	Chief Investment Officer	Multinational insurance firm
P8	Chief Executive Officer	Oil and gas company
P9	Chief Executive Officer	Mobile app development company
P10	Human Resource Senior Executive	Construction company

The interviews were conducted in English, and all except one were audio-taped. The main questions asked during the interview were:

1. Are communication skills and language proficiency the same or different to you?

2. How important are communication skills and language proficiency in your company?
3. What should universities do to prepare their graduates for the workplace?

The interviews, totaling 291 minutes, were transcribed for analysis. The 21,433-word interview transcripts were read and reread to capture emerging themes. In the initial readings, coding was not done but in the later readings, when the patterns had emerged, the interview transcripts were coded for these main themes: language proficiency, communication skills, and other qualities. Sometimes the employers used different terms to refer to the same themes and some of these were missed in the initial coding. For example, some referred to employees with good proficiency in English as having “fluency” or “bombastic English”, and being able to “speak English very well”. On the contrary, poor proficiency in English is referred to as “simple and basic English” and “broken English”. During the analysis, it also became evident that the importance of English proficiency and communication skill need to be analyzed separately for recruitment and career advancement because the employers differentiated between these two stages of their employees’ career. Efforts were made to ensure that the researchers’ views do not constrain the data analysis by rereading the interview transcript and referring to the Malaysian private sector context on which the employers were basing their comments.

In this paper, excerpts are taken from the interview transcripts to illustrate the results. The excerpts were minimally edited for grammaticality to ease reading but the nature of spoken language has been mostly retained (e.g., repetitions, incomplete sentences). The sources of the information are marked as P1, P2 to P10 (refer to Table 1 for the position of the employer and the company).

FINDINGS

In the first and second parts of the results, the focus is on why communication skills and English proficiency are important in the private sector respectively. The results are presented from the perspective of employers who have the authority to recruit new employees for their organizations. In the third part of the results, the employers’ views on the importance of one or both of these qualities (communication skills and English proficiency) are presented.

Importance of communication skills in the private sector

The results presented in this section show that the 10 employers put good communication skills as a priority when they recruit new employees, but they

have different perspectives on what good communication skills are and reasons for its importance. At the basic level, good communication skill is the ability to make oneself understood (P4), to understand others (P6), to converse and mingle in a group (P3). However, good communicative skills went beyond ability to interact with others. P5 stated that he wanted to recruit employees who were able to communicate with people of all levels, able to convince, influence and motivate others. Versatility in communication is important because workplace interactions are with colleagues from different levels and departments and clients from different sectors. To P7, the Chief Investment Officer of a multinational insurance firm, good communicative skills include the ability to be convincing even when they were unsure about something:

Excerpt 1

If you do a presentation, suddenly a spontaneous question is asked and it’s something that you don’t know. So you must know how to play with the issue. In fact, if you can’t convince them, confuse them so that it is okay. You must have certain skills to communicate and to make sure that you manage to defend yourself well at that time. (P7)

P10, the human resource senior executive of a construction company, asked candidates to make a short presentation during interviews to assess their communication skill, and he felt that overseas graduates are usually more confident and convincing. P2 even said that good communication skills include the ability to read the body language of customers and the employer.

Based on the interview data, the employers interviewed in this study had high expectations when they assessed the communication skills of applicants for vacant positions in their organization. For applicants who are not fresh graduates, one employer (P3) said that those know their job well can usually communicate better. They can project their passion in their job, exude confidence in themselves and demonstrate their creativity in handling their work. P6 said that he could overlook poor proficiency in English and employ candidates who conversed with confidence at the job interview and convinced him that they knew their stuff. Therefore, it can be concluded that subject matter knowledge can job applicants more convincing when they are on par with one another in versatility and interactive ability.

However, a number of employers made exceptions to the priority they set on good communication skill, but for positions involving technical work, as explained in P6 in Excerpt 2:

Excerpt 2

It depends on the job. There are some jobs that are very technical. And the one that come for the interview are very nerdy, do not know how to deal or talk to people, they only know how to talk to

wires, machines or whatsoever and with some R&D kind of job, so perhaps that one I don't care if he doesn't want to speak, ... as long as he is technically sound and I will take him for the job. But those are not many. ... Even so, technical jobs you still need to work with people. That's why this organization we have two career track. One is sort of management track where we have to identify our talent and one day they become leaders in an organisation. The other one is more for technical. (P6)

The salaries of those on the technical track may increase, and they may be promoted to supervisor and senior engineer positions, for example, but their promotion would not be as obvious as those who have communication skills and advance on the management track to the position of a manager. The manager will shift from technical work to managerial work involving decision-making and coordination with other departments. There are technical positions in multinational banks (P2), insurance firms (P4) and telecommunication companies (P6), particularly for graduates with engineering and information technology degrees. For technical positions, skills take priority over communication skills. As P10 put it, it is "experience first, then communication skills." Interestingly, engineers nowadays are not only expected to have technical expertise but "language and communication skills are recognized as important elements in the education of the modern engineer, including English for specific purposes" (Shinde, 2016, p. 55).

In other types of work involving teamwork, good communication skill is essential. In the animation industry, projects are usually accomplished through teamwork, and communication between the parties involved is important for project completion. As P1 explains in Excerpt 3, having an excellent skills set is not sufficient to qualify one as a team leader because the leader needs to communicate what the director or client wants to the team and the rest of the chain.

Excerpt 3

Especially in animation its very project-based where you are doing it not just as a team but a cross, a multiple skills set is required from end to end. Someone that is doing concept art or whatever needs to be able to make sure what his vision is and carried over till the end. ... As you go up to become a team leader, the higher you go up, the better communication skill you have and the better ability to understand a client's brief. What the director says they have to be able to tell. Communication skills are very important as you go up. (P1)

P2 brought home the same point by asking "if you don't have the right communication skills, how are you going to manage your staff, because we are managing about 47,000 staff?" Crosling and Ward's (2002) study on Business/Commerce undergraduates

from Monash University, Australia found that graduates have difficulty in communicating with those of higher status and from other companies. In other words, they do not have the versatility to adapt their communication to the situational context and interactants.

Importance of English proficiency in the private sector

Analysis of the interview data uncovered three reasons for the importance of English proficiency. Firstly, it is important for job applicants to have good English proficiency if the organisation uses English as a working language. This is particularly the case for organisations which are globally-oriented. For example, P2, the human capital business relationship executive of a bank with branches all over the world, said that English is the most important language because it is the common language used when employees from different branch offices communicate on a regional project. However, P2 conceded that local languages can be used when liaising with Malaysians, as opposed to foreign business counterparts, as shown in Excerpt 4:

Excerpt 4

Standard English or local English, it doesn't matter sometimes. As long as the message is delivered. Depends on which level you're dealing with. Let's say you (inaudible) you do high level, we are usually dealing with external parties like from other regions, like from Cambodia, (inaudible) country, we are really looking for a standard language (inaudible). But let's say that the target group is only local, it's fine. They feel more comfortable with the local language. The main point here is how they communicate the message. (P2)

Other two employers (P5, Talent and Development Manager of an Asia-Pacific insurance firm and P6, chief human capital manager of a telecommunication firm) confirm the role of English as the lingua franca with foreign business counterparts.

On the contrary, for organizations which did not use English as the official language, the employers did not stress English proficiency when they evaluated job applicants for suitability to the job. P1 the chief executive officer of an animation company explained in Excerpt 5 that proficiency in English was not crucial because both Malay and English were used as working languages:

Excerpt 5

In our company, it's a mixed environment where we speak English and Bahasa [Malay], two languages. Not necessarily but initially, most of the students do not understand some instruction. Then the seniors have to give, the proficiency is not there. They can communicate but they might not be able to relate their problems. (P1)

P1 knew that his employees could use Malay to do their work, but he found that his new employees could not communicate well enough with the seniors and supervisors to acclimatize to their work. This affected their work performance in the early part of their employment. P9, the Chief Executive Officer of a mobile apps development company, also employed many Malays in his company and Malay was the working language. Therefore, he has employed graduates who speak “as if they have never learned English in school” but he “gives them chance to prove themselves especially if their programming skills are good.”

Secondly, good English proficiency is more important for certain types of job such as marketing, customer service, bank frontline and insurance jobs. During job interviews, P4 the chief marketing officer of a Malaysian insurance firm tested the ability of shortlisted candidates to write in English by asking them to write a case study that had impact on their life. This is because from his observation, employees could not write as well as they speak. However, for other types of jobs where employees could use other languages like Malay and Mandarin with their clients and colleagues, English was needed for only specific tasks like writing emails and reports, and making oral presentations to the upper management (P5).

Thirdly, even though English proficiency may not be important at the starting point of the career, it becomes more important later in the career. The employers explained why the need for English increases with advancement in position. P5 said that they needed to write longer emails in English. P6 said that as employees are promoted, they need to use more English in board meetings and project management meetings with external parties. P4 said that it is necessary to explain technical matters in simple terms to board members who do not have the technical experience. With advancement in position, the employees come into contact with colleagues at higher hierarchical levels. More English is used at higher hierarchical levels in a semi-government organisation in Kuching, Sarawak (Ting, 2007). To sum up, English proficiency is important when the organisations are globally-oriented, and uses English as their working language, and fresh graduates seeking employment in these organisations are expected to have good English proficiency. Based on what the employers said in the interviews, a good mastery of English is needed to advance in the career.

***Communication skills and English proficiency:
Which is more important?***

The analysis of the interview results revealed that the employers considered language proficiency and communication skills as different qualities in that one who has a good command of English does not

unnecessarily know how to communicate well, as illustrated by P5's comment in Excerpt 6:

Excerpt 6

Yes, you can speak and yes, you are a fluent user of a language but however, when you're put in a situation when you may need to get your ideas across, you may need to convince, influence, motivate someone, it can be a different ball game all together. (P5)

To P2, someone with a good command of English may use bombastic vocabulary but is unable to accomplish a task due to lack of audience awareness:

Excerpt 7

English is a very unique language where you can use rich vocabulary with the right vocabulary to the right person. But with someone who seldom uses English, but you use very bombastic vocabulary with them, they won't understand. The task cannot be performed. (P2)

P4 expressed the same view as P2 but P4 acknowledged that broken English can cause a communication breakdown, as shown in Excerpt 8:

Excerpt 8

You can be speaking in not very proper English. Unless you are speaking in broken English [then people do not understand you]. But if you speak with a very clear tone, clear manner, people will understand you. Now that is communication. So language proficiency, can you be a very, what do you call it, a proficient English speaker, proficient Malay speaker but you may speak in a way that people don't understand, then that is not communication. (P4)

To these employers, good communication skill is more than fluency, and they have repeatedly said that one with a good mastery of English cannot be presumed to have good communicative skills. However, P3 and P4 were of the view that some level of language proficiency is needed for good communication to take place. P3 said, “I can say if they do not have good command in English, it will affect their communication.” P8, the Chief Executive Officer of an oil and gas company, said that language proficiency is needed to communicate well. In other words, below the threshold level which has not been established, language proficiency and communication skill are linked but beyond the threshold, there is no relationship between the two.

As one employer (P6) said, new employees can improve in their English within a year if they work in an environment where English is extensively used, like in multinational corporations:

Excerpt 9

Let me tell you, their [some candidates who were interviewed] English is atrocious but they are very

confident. They don't care about their grammar, tenses or whatever, as long as they get their message through. So as an interviewer, so I'd be looking at okay, this bloke has confidence, he wants to be able to converse, and they get by, at least from an interviewer's standpoint. I need an engineer, for example, I don't need this guy to speak Queen's English. As long as he understands the technical data, understands technical instructions, I'm okay. They may speak half past six or broken English whatever but enough for the interviewer to understand and okay, this guy knows his stuff, he can come on board. Once we take this guy or this girl on board, they confidently go about their day to day affairs, and after a while within a year because of the environment in multinationals, they speak in English and improve tremendously. (P6)

P6 is the chief human capital officer of a telecommunication company in Malaysia where English is the working language. Yet he is able to look beyond their poor command of the language as long as the candidates can demonstrate good communication skills during the interview.

What can be surmised from the varying viewpoints of the 10 employers is that communication skills and English proficiency are different qualities but they are related to each other. Some level of proficiency in English is a pre-requisite for communication skills to develop and therefore, it is not possible for employees to have good communication skills in English if they do not have certain threshold level of English proficiency. However, having a good mastery of English does

not guarantee that the employee can communicate well because employees may not be versatile enough to adapt their communication to the situational context and interactants and, in the process, fail to exude confidence and demonstrate competency in the subject matter. The employers also believed that communication skills can develop with experience in the job. Kumar (2016), in writing about English and graduate employability in India, also brought up the situation of graduates who have English competency but lack communication skills; thereby, reinforcing the employers' observations that English proficiency does not automatically result in good communication skills.

During the interviews, the employers were asked to state which was more important to them. Table 2 presents a summary of their stance. Their position on this question was analysed based on their answers to the two interview questions: "How important are communication skills and language proficiency in your company?" and "What should universities do to prepare their graduates for the workplace?" The reasons given in Table 2 are not the exact words used the employers because it would be too lengthy but the summary of the supporting reasons for the stance retains the meanings. Figure 2 shows an adaptation of Schramm's (1954) model of communication which takes into account distinctive but interlinked elements of communication skills and language proficiency.

Table 2. Employers' stance on whether communication skills or English proficiency was more important

Employer	Stance	Supporting reasons
P1	Communication skills	Other languages can be used to communicate if the employees do not have the English proficiency
P2	Both	Both are important, depending on type of job and organisational level
P3	English proficiency	English proficiency determines ability to communicate
P4	English proficiency	In Malaysia, the business language is still English
P5	Communication skills	Graduates have learnt English for many years in school and university, and are still not proficient. He does not expect graduates to be proficient in English.
P6	Communication skills	He would employ a candidate whose English is atrocious but is confident when communicating
P7	Communication skills	His company needs employees who is book smart and can defend themselves when communicating
P8	English proficiency	No language proficiency equals limited communication abilities
P9	Communication skills	Priority is given to core skills and communicative ability rather than language ability.
P10	Communication skills	Priority is given to skills and knowledge and he has recruited engineers who cannot speak English well.

Table 2 shows that out of 10 employers, six accorded more importance to communication skills, three felt that English proficiency is more important, and one insisted on the equal importance of both. For the three who believed in the importance of English proficiency, it is mainly because English is the business language (P4) and is necessary for any communication to take place in English (P3 and P8). For employers who believed in the importance of

communication skills, there were two categories. The first category comprised those who have given up on recruiting Malaysian graduates with good English proficiency as other languages can be used in the multilingual workplace (P1 and P5). The second category comprised those who believed that communicative ability, core skills and knowledge were far more important than English proficiency (P6, P7, P9, P10). In sum, more employers stressed

the importance of good communication skill but fewer put the emphasis on English proficiency – unlike the media which highlights university graduates' poor mastery of English in Malaysia (e.g. Aruna, 2011; Singh & Singh, 2008; Teoh, 2011; Yasin et al., 2010).

The graduate employability situation in India is similar to Malaysia, where less than 25% of graduates succeed in finding jobs, and inadequate English proficiency and communication skills is also an issue (Pooja, 2013). Even in English-speaking countries, there is a mantra “globalisation means businesses need languages” (Canning, 2009), and in

their case it is foreign language skills which are considered an asset for graduates to have. In the United Kingdom, the debate is on whether foreign language skills increase employability of graduates. Canning (2009) argues that language competence is only one of the outcomes of a modern language degree and the graduates learn other skills that increase their employability such as intercultural competence, critical thinking and self-motivation. Figure 2 describes a model of communication to reflect the perspective of employers in the Malaysian private sector.

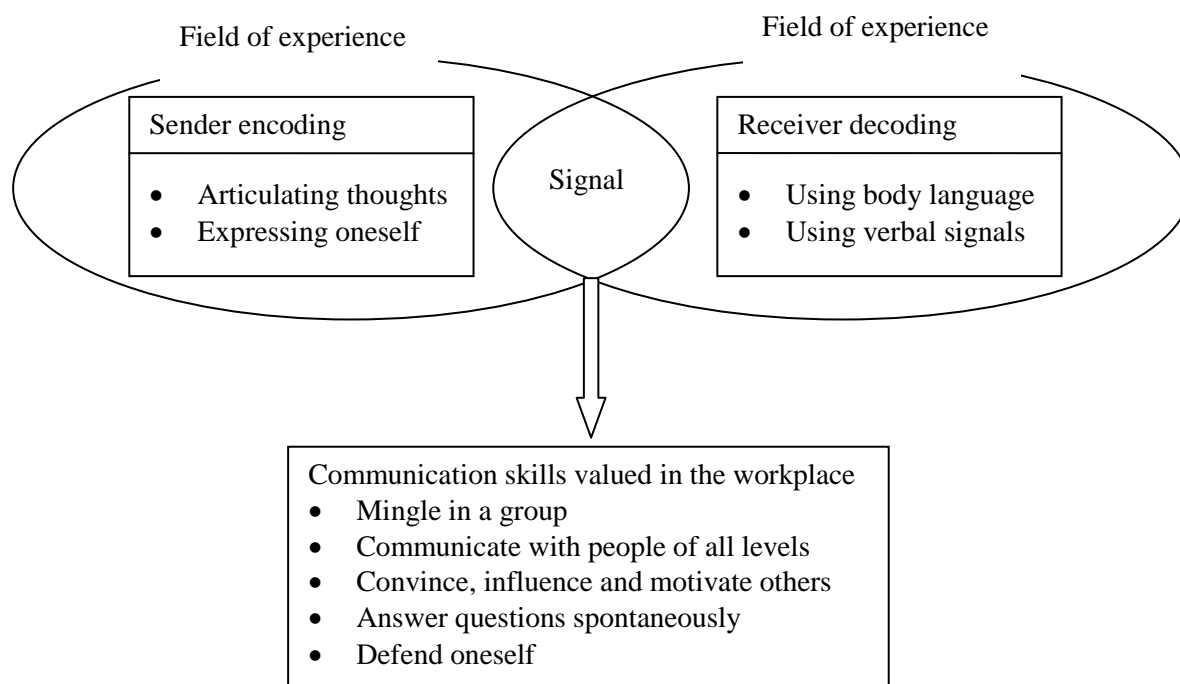


Figure 2. Adaptation of Schramm's (1954) model of communication to reflect the perspective of employers in the Malaysian private sector

DISCUSSION

The study on employers' perspective of the influence of language proficiency and communication skill on graduate employability yielded three key findings. First, the employers' notion of the relationship between language proficiency and communication skill is close to constructs defined by researchers who believe that the goal of language learning is interactional competence and not merely proficiency (e.g., Byrnes, 1984; Kramsch, 1986; Young, 2013). The employers viewed language proficiency and communication skill as different elements but acknowledged that an extremely poor command of the language would impede communication. Their actions backed up their beliefs on the distinctiveness of the two elements because in their years of recruiting new employees for their company, they had shortlisted candidates with average grades in English for interviews to give them the opportunity to prove themselves. In their experience, there were

some candidates with “broken English” and “atrocious English” who could communicate confidently, and they were employed.

Secondly, good communication skill is more important than proficiency for graduate employability. The employers' observation of the graduates' poor communication skill concurs with the results of studies in Malaysia (Yasin et al., 2010) and the United Kingdom (Graduate Prospects, November 2011). The employers also felt that communication is a top skill, similar to the findings of studies conducted in Malaysia (Singh & Singh, 2008), Thailand (Pattanaoichet & Chinokul, 2011), Australia (Crebert et al., 2004) and the United States (DuPre & Williams, 2011). At the interview stage, good communication skill allows university graduates to stand out compared to other candidates competing for the vacancy. The communication skill examined in the present study and focused on by these researchers is oral communication, and findings of other studies concur on speaking being

an important skill for engineering graduates in India (Ganesan & Angeline, 2017) and Iran (Rezaee & Kazempourian, 2017).

However, the study also revealed that a good mastery of English is exceedingly important for jobs involving customer service, frontline service and marketing, and in globally-positioned companies. In these contexts, poor English proficiency may compromise the ability to communicate effectively. English is particularly important for the engineering profession (Shivakumar & Sharma, 2017). There are a number of recent studies which reiterate the importance of English proficiency to get employed and advance in the career. Based on their study in Bahrain, Thomas et al. (2016) concluded that university students need to be taught English for communication purposes that covers both specialized discourse fields and broader generic employability skills and competencies. Similarly, Fan, Fei, Schriever, and Fan's (2017) interviews with foreign shipowners and Chinese crewing agents revealed that English communicative competence increases employability of Chinese seafarers on ships owned by international maritime companies.

This leads to the third point, which is although good communication skill and English proficiency are desirable, these cannot compensate for good work performance once the graduates have been employed. A number of studies have shown the importance of communication skill for career advancement in Malaysia (Lie, Pang, & Mansur, 2009) and Australia (Crosling & Ward, 2002; Riemer, 2002). When both language proficiency and communication skill are lacking, like the Canadian medical graduates in Hall, Keely, Dojeiji, Byszewki, and Marks' study (2004), their work performance and self-esteem are affected. In the present study, good communication skill cannot compensate for work commitment, good attitude and technical skills for career advancement. Kubota's (2013) study on employees in six manufacturing companies in Japan and their subsidiaries in China also showed that "linguistic competency did not override professional competence" (p. 15). A functional conclusion that can be drawn from the study is for graduates to enter the workplace with both high levels of English mastery and communication skill.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study has shown that language proficiency and communication skill cannot be conceptualized as equivalent elements because the scope of skills is clearly different, even to employers who are not researchers in the field. Therefore, studies on graduate employability should examine them as separate factors. However, what is more crucial from this study is the threshold level of English proficiency which is needed for developing good communication skills. This is an area of further

investigation which can bring about a better understanding of what students need to learn in order to be able to use the language for relevant communicative purposes in the workplace.

The findings of this study suggest that it is important for universities to put programs in place to ensure that their students develop English proficiency and good communication skill. For students to learn to speak English with confidence, the use of English should not only be confined to language classes but extended to other subjects. The use of English across the curriculum is important to provide an English-speaking environment for Malaysian university graduates who are more used to speaking their ethnic languages among themselves (e.g., Malay, Mandarin). Group and project work provides the context for students to develop communication skills, and is already used extensively in universities to allow students to develop leadership and teamwork skills.

However, lecturers can play a role to identify their students' strengths in speaking or writing and encourage them to develop these skills in their group work. This is applicable to students who are generally weak in their language, and who need to work at improving both their language and communication skill. As a direct preparation for the workplace, the group and project work should reflect tasks performed during employment to give them the hands-on experience and avenue to apply the theories learnt. With these kinds of adjustments in university learning structures, it is hoped that university graduates will be better prepared for the workplace, thereby increasing their employability.

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