

## English for Workplace: What Do We Need to Teach?

Ahmad-Tajuddin, Azza Jauhar and Samsiah Abdul Hamid  
Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia

**Abstract:** Malaysian employers have considerable reservations when it comes to graduate's employability skills, particularly their flawed English language competence. Given the challenges faced by higher education institutions in Malaysia to match employer's requirements, there is a need to initiate holistic and comprehensive research on the curriculum practices of current English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses. This study pursues to better comprehend employer's perspectives, expectations and practices in dealing with the English language demands of the workplace environment. This study will define Professional Communication Skills (PCS) by looking at the needs and requirements of Malaysian stakeholders, namely employers, the government and academia. This component explores the requirements, suggestions as well as common practices in relation to English language communication carried out at the workplace in the public and private sectors in Malaysia as voiced by the stakeholders. This information will help to fulfil the fundamental objective of this study which is to determine the key definition of PCS identified by Malaysian stakeholders for successful workplace functions. This qualitative study sits within the interpretivist paradigm where data were primarily drawn from in-depth interviews with 24 respondents in the following subgroups: human resource managers from key multi-national industries (10 respondents); government executives who recruit entry-level employees for public sector (4 respondents) and EOP instructors and HE liaison officers for industrial training (10 respondents). This study has yielded findings that make an original contribution to both the theory and practice of English language literacies since it adds to the broader field of workplace literacies by unveiling the requirements for English language used in a professional setting situated in a Malaysian context. These outcomes are especially beneficial for informing policy maker's agendas in producing competent graduates for the future local and global workforce.

**Key words:** Professional communication skills, workplace English, higher education, ESL, Malaysia

---

### INTRODUCTION

Malaysian employers have expressed their dissatisfaction with the general level of preparedness of graduates who are prospective employees. A considerable amount of research has shown that there is a gap between employer's requirements of entry-level employees and their actual skills (MEF, 2009; Sarudin *et al.*, 2008). Employer's dissatisfaction with graduates is not primarily due to inadequate technical knowledge or skills. Rather, employers have considerable reservations when it comes to graduate's nontechnical abilities or employability skills, particularly their English language proficiency (Ambigapathy and Aniswal, 2005; MEF, 2009; Stapa *et al.*, 2008; Sarudin *et al.*, 2008; Stapa *et al.*, 2008). It has been stressed by employers that graduates are not only accepted as employees for knowledge and specific technical competencies but also

for a certain level of communication, social, emotional and critical thinking skills to enable workers, for example to work in teams, to motivate themselves when confronting challenges, to solve interpersonal disputes and to tolerate high levels of stress.

Malaysia's economy has been growing at an annual rate of 6.6% for the past three decades; yet unemployment rates have increased from 2.6% in 1996-3.6% in 2010 (MDS, 2011). The numbers show that young graduates, in particular, experience difficulties in securing their first jobs and many graduates hold jobs that do not correspond to their education and expectations. Of critical importance to the massive expansion of higher education to these HE institutions are the challenges in terms of the need to plan and support the further expansion of the system and its quality and relevance. In order to support the expansion, suggests that HE institutions set up an appropriate internal quality assurance mechanism and equally,

establish linkages with all relevant stakeholders government departments responsible for human resource development, industry and the private sector, their alumni, etc., in determining the programmes to be offered and the output needed out of the programmes offered. It is important to consider the above factors since research proves that there is a critical link between current unemployment of graduates and improper planning of higher education institutions after a massive expansion when appropriate measures are not taken (Aihara, 2009).

The purpose of this research is to develop a Professional Communication Skills (labelled PCS from here onwards) in English framework to help in supporting English lecturers and instructors teaching EOP courses in Malaysian higher education institutions. The PCS framework will consist of the communication constructs in English related to PCS skills essential for Malaysian graduates for instance, verbal and non-verbal communication, interpersonal communication and cultural competence. These PCS skills will include the needs of employers from the public and private sectors. Therefore, the voices of Malaysian stakeholders, namely the government, multi-national companies and academia will be explored, analysed and summarised in this PCS framework. In doing so, a qualitative approach to inquiry, couched within the interpretive paradigm for data collection and analysis will be used to facilitate an in-depth and detailed understanding of Malaysian stakeholder's needs in relation to PCS in English.

**English literacy in employability (Malaysian context):** A search of the literature has established that very few studies have been carried out on English language communication practices and competencies for employability in English as a second language contexts (Stapa *et al.*, 2008; Wahi, 2012). Additionally, looking at the Malaysian context, research and practical solutions for improving undergraduate courses in HEIs on communication practices at the workplace is still lacking. In general, most studies in developed countries have dealt with the language, literacy and numeracy needs of immigrants or non-native speakers in the labour force, for example in Canada (Bell, 2000; Duff *et al.*, 2002) Australia (Millar, 2001) and the united states (Hacker and Yankwitz, 1997). The findings of the above studies appeal for an increase in contextualized, interpretive and critical qualitative studies to examine the experiences, barriers and outcomes associated with language and literacy education.

On the other hand, in the united kingdom primarily, existing studies in the form of empirical work on employability have concentrated on the impact of government policy, organisational strategies, mid-career workers, the wider society and educationalists (Brown and Harvey, 2004; Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Yorke, 2006). Camevale *et al.* (1990) state that 'employers depend on educators to provide job-ready and training-ready entry-level employee's. Teichler (1999) concludes that HEIs should serve three functions when preparing students: the educational function the cognitive and intellectual capabilities needed to conceive broad knowledge; the training function the competencies needed to assist students in specific, specialized work; and the socialization function the 'values, attitudes, social behaviour and the communication skills relevant for action in socio-communicative context's.

In Malaysia, the quality of education in the country has been questioned, in view of the fact that a sizeable number of local graduates remain unemployed (Stapa *et al.*, 2008). In addition, the changing demands of higher education as a consequence of globalisation have prompted considerable research with unemployment issues as its central focus (MHE, 2006). Many requests and views have been put forward suggesting the need to bridge the gap or mismatch between the available supply of manpower and the expectations of potential employers. That English language determines employability has often been confirmed and discussed in these studies. In their studies Stapa *et al.* (2008), Hyland and Hamp (2002) stress that ensuring graduates can function in English in the workplace is a major issue in Malaysia and many developing countries. They state that graduates have poor mastery of English, especially in the area of communication. This is a major factor contributing to unemployment of graduates in addition to low academic achievement and the lack of technical knowledge. Graduates from Malaysian universities have been perceived as lacking in communication skills and proficiency in English language in most studies.

One prominent study on unemployment problems among graduates from Malaysian HEIs was conducted by Stapa *et al.* (2008). Using the survey instrument and focus group interview techniques they identified the reasons why Malaysian graduates are not successful in getting employed. An important finding of this study suggests that the approach in the teaching programme needs to integrate communication and English literacy skills of the 21st century. They agree that a framework or module on communication skills in English must be designed to

assist and train lecturers to design the syllabus and teaching methods (Stapa *et al.*, 2008). The framework designed must be accompanied by a series of training modules to help lecturers in integrating content and workplace English literacy in their teaching and assessment of the students.

The Malaysian National Higher Education Research Institute carried out another research study of the University curriculum and employability needs. Drawing data from focus group interviews and questionnaires, this study provides a constructive information base from which to understand the issue from the viewpoints of those in industry and from the viewpoints of academics and graduates in relation to the current university curriculum. The findings disclose that while the industrial sector prioritises English language competency, most local graduates are found lacking in confidence and cannot converse effectively in the language despite their excellent academic achievements. Correspondingly, the academics call attention to the mastery of English as an important requirement to help students understand lectures and to develop literacy in the workplace after graduation. This study notes that there is an urgent need to integrate 21st century literacy skills across the university curriculum in all fields of study. In addition, it recommends that learning and teaching should be conducted entirely in English at all public universities.

This study seeks to find answers to the issues by examining the problem itself and by having the problem-solvers or key informants share their insights and experiences, utilising a qualitative method of study. Thus, building on the theories and conclusions informed by previous research, this study turns towards developing an essential yet absent framework of PCS in ESL for Malaysian HEIs. Research in workplace literacies has concentrated less on examining student's English language literacy practices and competencies for workplace life; rather it has gone a long way in unpacking the more generic lists of competencies for the students to achieve. Hence, this theme needs to be addressed more centrally by critically looking at other elements of workplace literacy practices which include reading, listening and speaking, specifically in the English language. Despite, the lack of competence demonstrated by graduates in these skills, they are unfortunately not universally articulated as learning goals in current higher education curricula. Therefore, this study will help fill the gap in the literature by providing qualitative insights into stakeholder's practices and their requirements with regard to communicating in English at the workplace, especially at entry-level.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Qualitative research is best suited for this study of the phenomenon of English language workplace literacy practices and PCS of graduates about which little information is provided in the literature (Creswell, 2008). To surmount this deficit, the need for a detailed understanding of the issue from the perspectives of the participants, particularly in the Malaysian context, warrants the use of qualitative inquiry due to its fundamentally interpretive nature. This study sits within the interpretivist paradigm where data were primarily drawn from in-depth interviews with 24 respondents in the following subgroups: human resource managers from key multi-national industries (10 respondents); government executives who recruit entry-level employees for public sector (4 respondents) and EOP instructors and HE liaison officers for industrial training (10 respondents). The data were subjected to rigorous deductive and iterative analysis in which ATLAS.ti Software was applied. To assure the rigour, integrity and legitimacy of the research process and its worth, trustworthiness criteria were applied all the way through the study. In this study, the communicative competent model by Morreale *et al.* (2007) was implemented in order to have a sufficient theoretical blueprint to guide the study design, data collection and analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In an attempt to obtain comprehensive understanding on the stakeholder's point of view on future workforce, issues raised by the researched employers concerning the graduate's PCS produced by the local universities were presented and described. To encapsulate the stakeholder's requirements from the graduates, the professional communication skills framework in English is disclosed as appendix. Two core components that should be taught in HE classrooms are themed under cognitive knowledge and communication skills as shown in Table 1 and 2.

As Morreale *et al.* (2007) explain, knowledge in the context of communication constitutes the what and the how of communication; the content and procedural knowledge. Content knowledge is what we know about communication, how to form words while speaking or writing, how to gesture, use vocal control and employ physical proximity. It is an awareness of what behaviour is best suited for a given situation. This involves information about the people and context, the

Table 1: Cognitive knowledge desired by stakeholders

Sub components	Indicators	Requirement for workplace	Learning outcomes: 'Upon graduation, graduates should be able to...'
Content knowledge	Specific Jargon, discourse competence	Contribute to on-going improvement and expansion of knowledge in the betterment of workplace operations	Build a relevant knowledge base for workplace Apply their subject content knowledge at workplace Manage own learning in order to maintain and renew attributes throughout working lives Use specific work-related jargon appropriately in speech and reports
Cultural competence	Cultural knowledge to speak appropriately depending on setting (formal/casual)	Contribute to harmonious relations between superior, subordinates, colleagues and clients	Speak and write using the most appropriate register Agreeing/disagreeing with the superior and subordinate in a diplomatic manner Adapt with small talks with colleagues being aware with context awareness
Linguistic competence	Vocabulary grammar fluency pronunciation (clearly and accurately)	Contribute to meaningful and effective conversations using appropriate workplace discourse	Organise spoken and written language during a variety of communication tasks at workplace Present their speech and written work using appropriate vocabulary and fluency Clearly and accurately articulate words during workplace activities
Critical thinking	Hypothesising synthesising criticism scepticism	Contribute to constructive criticism while resolving issues at workplace	Critically synthesising their thoughts in a professional manner to improve situation Identify, analyse and solve problems critically and innovatively Give positive feedback and healthy criticism after analysing issues at workplace
Tasking skill	Defining problem analysing the problem identifying criteria for solving the problem generating solutions or alternatives evaluating solutions	Contribute to productive long-term and short-term strategic planning and effective execution of workplace tasks	Organise thoughts and solve workplace problems and issues Argue politely in generating solutions and alternatives in workplace issue Synthesise issues at work and evaluate solutions individually

Table 2: Communication skills desired by stakeholders

Sub components	Indicators	Requirement for workplace	Learning outcomes: 'Upon graduation, graduates should be able to...'
Interpersonal communication	Composure coordination attentiveness expressiveness	Contribute to diplomatic and matured communication between superior, subordinates and clients	Speak comfortably with employers, not hindered with nerves Pay attention to workplace communications activities and do not get distracted easily (with electronic devices) Attentive in formal or informal workplace communication which can help build rapport with superiors, colleagues and clients Well prepared prior to workplace meetings and planned activities in order to express opinions maturely
Presentation Skill	Appropriateness credibility clarity vividness voice (rate, pitch, volume)	Contribute to sharing of ideas and thoughts effectively with superior, colleagues and clients	Able to share ideas with colleagues creatively Able to persuade clients to accept their ideas by explaining in a simple yet interesting manner Keep spectator's attention using range of presentation skill, with the help of IT as a management tool Responding to enquiry from the clients
Speaking skill	Informative persuasive small talks counter arguing	Contribute to productive and appropriate verbal interactions at workplace	Inform audience (superiors, colleagues and clients) in an enlightening manner Contributing ideas and give opinions in group discussions Persuade superiors, colleagues and clients to accept ideas and opinions using well-defined explanations Use specialist vocabulary in a correct manner Give clear instructions to solve issues at work Initiating contact, requesting information on the telephone Seeking information from others at work Responding to enquiries/problems from superior/clients

Table 2: Continue

Sub component	Indicators	Requirement for workplace	Learning outcomes: 'Upon graduation, graduates should be able to...'
Non-verbal communication	Physical appearance (first impression) body communication touch voice time and space	Contribute to the ease and comfort during interactions	Appropriately dressed according to workplace occasions Be on time in all workplace functions Control own nerves in meetings with superior and clients in order to be less agitated Ensure their body language is not offensive during conversations with colleagues, superiors and clients Wear pleasant facial expression
Listening skill	Comprehend evaluate emphatise critique	Contribute to successful working relationships and effective execution of tasks	Ask if one does not understand instruction by superior, colleagues and clients Disagree politely if better ideas can be brought up Respond appropriately (speech or non-verbal communication) after understanding the instructions, questions, etc Fully comprehend what is going on around them at workplace Give feedback when asked by colleagues, superior and clients after fully understanding the situation Responds to client's complaints
*Writing skill	*Not part of CCM	Contribute to effective execution of tasks at work and making the work flow efficient	Filling in forms Write memo Write formal business letter Write minutes of meeting Write a summary of articles Write for the company's website Write formal/informal email messages Write items for newsletter Write reports using office template

communication rules and the normative expectations governing interaction with a member of the other culture (Morreale, 2001). In this research, graduates are expected not only to communicate in a professional manner at the workplace but they must also have ample information about the subject matter (Szubda and Jarosz, 2012). Therefore, the use of specific jargon and having suitable discourse competence is also essential for workplace communication. Having ample subject content knowledge will help contribute to on-going improvement and expansion of knowledge for the betterment of workplace operations.

Procedural knowledge comes into play during a communication situation. When graduates use the correct language and gestures, maintain proper volume and pitch of voice and remain conscious of appropriate physical distance, they display proper procedural knowledge of how to communicate in that situation. The subcomponents of cognitive knowledge which were desired by Malaysian stakeholders are content knowledge, cultural and linguistic competence, critical thinking as well as tasking skills.

Additionally, Malaysian stakeholders spoke about communication skills as one of the keys to personal and career success. Communication skill is having the ability to apply effective and appropriate behaviour in the given

communication context and the actual performance of the behaviour. Communication skills based on the needs of Malaysian stakeholders are grouped under five main sub components, namely interpersonal communication, presentation skills, speaking, writing and listening skills as well as non-verbal communication. The learning outcomes stated in the fourth column were voiced by the respondents on specific criteria that graduates should achieve prior to graduation. The findings demonstrated in these tables offered some depictions on the stakeholder's perspectives and expectations of future workforce, particularly in the area of communication in English at workplace.

## CONCLUSION

The present study has yielded findings that add an original contribution to both the theory and practice of English language literacies, focussing on the higher education level. Firstly, it adds to the broader view of workplace literacies by revealing the English language literacy practices in a professional setting situated in the Malaysian context. This study has provided conclusive evidence by documenting Malaysian stakeholder's requirements of workplace literacies for graduates, scrutinising the findings and developing a practical

PCS framework in English using a communication competence model (Morealle *et al.*, 2007) as its point of departure. Previously, these skills (i.e., cognitive competence, cultural competence, critical thinking, tasking skills and motivation) were usually treated separately from workplace literacies (Idrus *et al.*, 2010; Kaur and Khan Baksh, 2010; Pandian and Ghani, 2005; Pandian, 2006; Shah, 2011; UNESCO, 2012). This study differs from previous research in that the skills suggested were treated in parallel with each other. Additionally, since the participants involved in this study came from a variety of professions, it creates a standardised and generic template for all courses in HEIs and can be applied across the board. Future research can delve into PCS in English for specific careers by using the current outcome as a foundation. The PCS in English framework represents one of the main contributions of this study. Additionally, this study has uncovered an implicit aspect that is unique to the context of this study of Malaysian graduate's workplace literacies practices and competencies. It has led to a key insight and sheds light on the stakeholder's urgent need of graduates, not just equipped with PCS in English but also with certain essential professional attributes or qualities. Stakeholders in this research require future employees to have good, positive attitudes alongside strong PCS in English.

Furthermore, study which is concerned predominantly with both workplace communication skills and workplace literacy in English are still lacking. Therefore, this study helps to fill in that gap in the literature by providing qualitative insights into stakeholder's practices and their requirement with regard to communicating in English at the workplace, especially at entry-level. This study provides conclusive evidence of PCS since it sought answers to the issues by examining the problem itself and by having the 'problem-solver's or the key informants to share their insight and experiences, utilising a qualitative research method. Hence, building on the theories and implications informed by previous research, this study turned towards developing an essential, yet absent framework on PCS in ESL for Malaysian HEIs.

## REFERENCES

- Aihara, A., 2009. Paradoxes of higher education reforms: Implications on the Malaysian middleclass. *IJAPS.*, 5: 81-113.
- Ambigapathy, P. and A.G. Aniswal, 2005. University Curriculum: An Evaluation on Preparing Graduates for Employment. Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia.
- Bell, J., 2000. Literacy challenges for language learners in job-training programs. *Can. Mod. Lang. Rev.*, 57: 173-200.
- Brown, B.T. and L. Harvey, 2004. Are there too many graduates in the UK? A literature review and an analysis of graduate employability. *Ind. Higher Educ.*, 18: 243-254.
- Carnavale, A.P., L. Gainer and A.S. Meltzer, 1990. *Workplace Basics: The Essential Skills Employers Want*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, Sans Francisco, California.
- Creswell, J.W., 2008. *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. 3rd Edn., Pearson/Merrill PrenticeHall, USA., ISBN-13: 9780136135500, Pages: 670.
- Duff, P.A., P. Wong and M. Early, 2002. Learning language for work and life: The linguistic socialization of immigrant Canadians seeking careers in healthcare. *Mod. Lang. J.*, 86: 397-422.
- Hacker, E. and I. Yankwitt, 1997. Education, job skills or workfare: The crisis facing adult literacy education today. *Soc. Text*, 51: 109-117.
- Hillage, J. and E. Pollard, 1998. *Employability: Developing a Framework for Policy Analysis*. Department for Education and Employment, England, ISBN: 9780855228897, Pages: 51.
- Hyland, K. and L.L. Hamp, 2002. EAP: Issues and directions. *J. English Acad. Purposes*, 1: 1-12.
- Idrus, H., H.M. Dahan and N. Abdullah, 2010. Integrating critical thinking and problem solving skills in the teaching of technical courses: The narrative of a Malaysian Private University. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Congress on Engineering Education (ICEED)*, December 8-9, 2010, IEEE, Tronoh, Malaysia, ISBN:978-1-4244-7308-3, pp: 258-263.
- Kaur, S. and A.M. Khan, 2010. Language needs analysis of art and design students: Considerations for ESP course design. *ESP. World*, 9: 1-16.
- MDS., 2011. *Statistics of higher education of Malaysia 2010*. Malaysian Department of Statistics, Putrajaya, Malaysia.
- MEF., 2009. *Facing the realities of the world of work*. Malaysian Employment Federation, Malaysia.
- MOHE., 2006. *Module for the development of soft skills for higher learning*. Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- Millar, P., 2001. The workplace english language and literacy program in Tasmania. *Literacy Numeracy Stud.*, 11: 41-52.
- Morreale, S.P., 2001. *Assessing motivation to communicate*. National Communication Association, Washington, USA.

- Morreale, S.P., B.H. Spitzberg and J.K. Barge, 2007. Human Communication: Motivation, Knowledge, Skills. Wadsworth Publishing Group, Mishawaka, Indiana.
- Pandian, A. and A.P. Ghani, 2005. University Curriculum: An Evaluation on Preparing Graduates for Employment. Institut Penyelidikan Pendidikan Tinggi Negara, Penang, Malaysian, ISBN:9789833391059, Pages: 119.
- Pandian, A., 2010. University curriculum and employability needs. Higher Edu. Res. Monogr., 14: 1-8.
- Sarudin, I., A.M. Zubairi, M.S. Nordi and M.A. Omar, 2008. The English Language Proficiency of Malaysian Public University Students. In: Enhancing the Quality of Higher Education through Research: Shaping Future Policy, Ministry of Higher Education (Eds.). Ministry of Higher Education, Putrajaya, Malaysia, pp: 40-65.
- Shah, N.Z., 2011. Critical Thinking and Employability of Computer-related Graduates: The Malaysian Context. Dublin City University, Dublin, Republic of Ireland.
- Stapa, S.H., T.N.R.T. Maasum, R. Mustaffa and S. Darus, 2008. Workplace written Literacy and its effect on the curriculum. GEMA. Online J. Lang. Stud., 8: 23-33.
- Szuzda, A.W. and M.J. Jarosz, 2012. Professional communication competences of nurses. Annl. Agric. Environ. Med., 19: 601-607.
- Teichler, U., 1999. Research on the relationships between higher education and the world of work: Past achievements, problems and new challenges. Higher Edu., 38: 169-190.
- UNESCO., 2012. Graduate employability in Asia. UNESCO, Bangkok, Thailand.
- Wahi, W., 2012. English Language Academic Literacies for Employability of Malaysian Undergraduate Students. University of Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia,.
- Yorke, M., 2006. Employability in Higher Education: What it is-What it is Not. Higher Education Academy, New York, USA.