

Evaluating English Language Education for Career Readiness in Intercultural Communication: Employer Insights and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

The gap between academic training and industry expectations can be bridged by gathering insights from employers, particularly regarding the English language skills they value. Understanding these skills is essential for curriculum development and ensuring graduates are prepared for careers in intercultural communication. This research aims to achieve two main objectives: firstly, to assess the relevance and effectiveness of English language components in compulsory university courses, core courses and intercultural communication courses in meeting employers' requirements and secondly, to identify employers' recommendations for additional English language skills and courses to enhance graduates' career readiness in intercultural communication. A total of 112 respondents from both government and private sectors voluntarily participated in the survey, which was distributed at the end of the internship period before students completed their semester. The results indicate that graduates must equip themselves with intercultural communications in various professional settings to succeed in the professional environment and not just depend on their English language skills. Thus it is recommended for educational institutions to collaborate with industry stakeholders to gain more insight on specific needs of the current workplace environment.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Career Readiness, Employer Insights, Curriculum Alignment.

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, the importance of English proficiency among university graduates cannot be overstated, especially for those pursuing a career in intercultural communication. As a multicultural and multilingual nation, Malaysia's workforce is increasingly globalised, requiring effective communication skills in different cultural contexts. The Malaysian job market places great emphasis on English as a critical skill. Employers often emphasise the need for graduates to be able to clearly articulate their ideas and engage with various stakeholders (Ting et al., 2017). Despite the increasing importance of English language, there is an urgent need to evaluate the effectiveness of English language teaching in Malaysian universities. This evaluation is crucial to ensure that graduates are not only proficient in English but also able to apply their language skills in the professional environment, which will ultimately enhance their employability and career prospects in the global arena.

Research shows that effective English language education is integral to improving graduates' career readiness. The effectiveness of English components in compulsory university courses, core courses and specific intercultural communication courses need to be carefully assessed to ensure that they meet the needs of employers. Studies such as Husain and Mahfoodh's (2021) show how internships serve as a practical environment in which students can apply their English language skills, which ultimately impacts their performance in the workplace. As Mokhtar et al (2021) point out, English language skills are increasingly seen as essential for future success, so educational institutions need to adapt their curricula to meet the changing demands of the job market.

To bridge the gap between academic training and industry expectations, it is important to gather insights from employers. Knowing the specific English language skills that employers value can inform curriculum

development and ensure that graduates are well equipped for their careers in intercultural communication. Evidence suggests that employers prioritise candidates with solid communication skills in English as they consider these skills to be crucial indicators of potential job performance (Shrestha et al., 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to identify employers' recommendations for additional English language skills and courses to improve graduates' career readiness. Therefore, it is imperative to evaluate English language education in the context of career readiness in intercultural communication. This research aims to achieve two main objectives: firstly, to assess the relevance and effectiveness of English language components in compulsory university courses, core courses and intercultural communication courses in meeting employers' requirements and secondly, to identify employers' recommendations for additional English language skills and courses to enhance graduates' career readiness in intercultural communication.

The insights and recommendations from employers will provide valuable guidance for improving the relevance and effectiveness of English language components in university courses. By aligning educational practises with industry needs, we can better prepare graduates for the challenges of the global job market and ensure that they have the necessary skills to succeed in diverse professional environments. This research is intended to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about improving English language education, ultimately foster a workforce that meets the demands of today's interconnected world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of English Language Proficiency in Career Success

Proficiency in the English language plays a crucial role in determining the career success especially for new graduates. Professionals are expected to be proficient in navigating the various linguistic and cultural environments hence the need for intercultural competencies. Improved intercultural communication knowledge and abilities can promote multicultural interactions and foster greater acceptance and understanding towards others (Ilie, 2019). Given the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of global businesses and industries nowadays, the English language remains as the predominant language monopolising the landscape. Hence, proficiency in the language is crucial to succeed in international careers. Research indicates that employers do place a greater emphasis on communication skills, particularly fluency and proficiency in English, as a key qualification in the global employment success (Md Yatim et al., 2024). According to Ne'matullah et al. (2023), to be more competent in professional settings, one must have a strong command of the English language. Thus, being able to utilise the English strategically in varied professional contexts would contribute to career and professional advancement. These contexts range from writing reports and emails to managing negotiations and leading intercultural teams. The significance of proficiency in English grows more critical in global organisations, where it is frequently used as a working language. English is no longer solely an instrument for business relationships across the globe but is also frequently utilised in daily operations among colleagues (Nesaratnam et al., 2020). Research indicates that employees who demonstrate superior language skills often gain faster promotions, are trusted with cross-border responsibilities, and are seen as more competent communicators (John et al., 2021). Additionally, linguistic proficiency helps to establish strong professional relationships, which are essential for job advancement and long-term success.

English language proficiency alone is insufficient for success in the global market. Professionals are encouraged to complement their language skills with intercultural competence. In intercultural communication, it is essential not only to understand the language but also to grasp cultural nuances in order to prevent miscommunication. Tran and Duong (2018) emphasize that learners should develop an understanding of intercultural communication and the ability to apply these skills effectively, enabling them to navigate cultural differences and build more harmonious and productive relationships. This highlights the importance of education programmes that not only teach English but also provide students with the abilities to communicate effectively across different cultures, thus improving their chances of getting hired in a job market that is becoming more globalised.

Curriculum Effectiveness and Alignment with Industry Needs

The alignment between English language curricula and the actual needs of industries has been a subject of

extensive debate, especially in the context of preparing graduates for intercultural careers. Academic institutions often prioritize language competencies, yet employers frequently raise concerns over the practical application of these skills in work environments (Asefer and Abidin, 2021) and the ability in navigating the challenges arising from transformations in the workplace (Poláková et al., 2023). Many English language education programmes continue to adhere to conventional pedagogy that focus heavily on grammar, reading comprehension, and literature, (Abu Bakar et al., 2021) often overlooking the practical communication skills needed for the professional world. Consequently, while graduates may possess outstanding academic English skills, they often find it challenging to effectively use these skills in real-world professional situations. This creates a gap between the skills students possess upon graduation and the skills employers are looking for in potential employees (Kenayathulla, 2019). Additionally, educators at the tertiary level must address the challenges students face in mastering English language proficiency and intercultural communication skills required by employers. Despite being hindered by constrained resources, challenging work conditions, such as heavy teaching loads, educators are expected to help enhancing students' English language skills (Doan and Hamid, 2021). While they need to consider workforce demands when designing and implementing English language programmes and integrate intercultural communication skills into the curriculum, they might lack a clear input of the intercultural competencies needed in the job market. Therefore, without formal and continuous practices to support collaborations between universities and industries, instructors may miss out on the industry feedback necessary for effective academic planning.

Hence it is important to acknowledge the need for a review of the curriculum to match the industry expectations more accurately, especially in fields where intercultural communication is prioritise. Employers in global companies now look for graduates who are not just fluent in English but who also excel in soft skills like negotiation, persuasion, and handling conflicts (Jasim Mohammed et al., 2023), which are skills that are invaluable when dealing with intercultural situations. Anjum (2020) pointed out that offering hands-on learning opportunities, like internships, among others allows students to utilise their language skills in authentic professional settings. This is crucial in bridging the gap between classroom learning and the practical skills required to tackle communication challenges in the diverse job market. Furthermore, with the rapid rise of digital communication at the workplace, employers are looking for candidates with strong digital literacy skills (Kadhim, 2024). This shift reflects the changing nature of work, where international collaboration often happens through digital platforms, requiring professionals to adjust how they use language for emails, video conferences, and social media communication. Hence institution should conduct a curriculum review to include digital skills, media interaction, and technological skills as the use of English online are increasingly seen as essential for preparing students for the workforce. adhere to its specific conventions. This dual proficiency is crucial for producing work that is clear, credible, and contributes meaningfully to the body of knowledge.

Employer Perspectives on English Language Skills in Graduates

Employers across various sectors agree that strong English language skills are crucial for helping graduates to transition smoothly into their jobs. Multiple studies emphasise that employers widely agree that English proficiency is not just beneficial but crucial for effective performance in the workplace. As mentioned by Krishnan et al., (2024), half of the employers surveyed use English proficiency as a key factor in performance evaluations. The evaluations highlight the significance in everyday tasks such as phone calls, meetings, and written communications, all of which are primarily conducted in English. However, Tushar and Sooraksa (2023) noted that while many employers value English proficiency, graduates often lack the practical communication skills needed in the workplace, especially regarding intercultural communication. Despite having a good grasp of grammar and vocabulary, many graduates struggle to adapt their language style to diverse professional contexts. This includes managing challenging discussions, delivering formal presentations, and interacting with clients from different cultural backgrounds (Iqbal et al., 2023).

Graduates frequently face challenges in managing intercultural communication in workplace environments, especially in their ability to integrate into multicultural settings. This is because cultural expectations, such as communication styles, punctuality, and power dynamics, vary widely across different contexts as our behavior and expectations of others are shaped by our cultural backgrounds (Aririguzoh, 2022). Furthermore, graduates

frequently struggle with showing cultural sensitivity, choosing the right tone, and maintaining professional behavior in their communications (Sahadevan and Sumangala, 2021). Feedback approaches also differ between academic and professional environments. Other than that, graduates accustomed to structured academic feedback may find workplace feedback to be vague or insufficient for personal development, thus according to Gnepp et al., (2020) complicating their adaptation to professional roles. Many employers have expressed dissatisfaction with the language and intercultural skills of new hires, attributing these issues to gaps in their education (Al Riyami, 2021). As a result, employers are increasingly seeking candidates who possess both strong language skills and the ability to navigate cross-cultural communication effectively. This situation underscores a pressing need for educators and institutions to collaborate with industry stakeholders. By doing so, they can develop a curriculum that equips students with the requisite skills tailored to meet the dynamic demands of the workplace.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a quantitative approach utilising a cross-sectional survey design to collect data from organisations that hosted interns from the Bachelor of Applied Language Studies (Hons.): English for Intercultural Communication programme at Universiti Teknologi MARA. This quantitative method was selected as it effectively examines employer perceptions of language proficiency and its role in career advancement. The cross-sectional design provides a view of employers' perspectives and expectations (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The population for this research was organisations that hosted interns from the Bachelor of Applied Language Studies (Hons.): English for Intercultural Communication programme. Purposive sampling was used to focus on interns from the English for Intercultural Communication programme, ensuring direct relevance to the programme. The survey was distributed to 124 semester six students from the programme who were undergoing their internship. The students were from two cohorts; (1) 58 students from October 2023 – February 2024 session and (2) 66 students from March 2024 – July 2024 session. Surveys were distributed at the conclusion of the internship period, before students finish their final semester, to obtain immediate feedback from host organisations about the interns' performance and their expectations. Subsequently, simple random sampling was employed within these organisations to ensure unbiased participation and equal selection opportunity, enhancing the study's representativeness (Creswell, 2014; West, 2016). The survey gathered responses from 112 respondents across diverse public and private sectors. These respondents represented different industries, providing a broad spectrum of perspectives on the employability of graduates from the programme.

The survey comprised two primary sections: (1) Language Proficiency and Career Advancement; This section examined the link between the interns' English proficiency and their career potential, including the impact of communication skills on job placement prospects, and (2) Employer Valuation of Language Skills – This section identified specific language skills prioritized by employers, such as negotiation, problem-solving, and intercultural communication, and their influence on long-term career paths. The questionnaire featured closed-ended questions to facilitate quantitative analysis and easy response comparison. The data gathered enabled an analysis of how language skills, particularly in English, influenced job placements and the long-term career trajectories of graduates. This provided valuable insights into how well the English for Intercultural Communication programme prepares students for the job market and highlighted potential areas for improvement to better align with industry expectations.

Once the researchers obtained the data, the data was analysed using frequency analysis. The results later will be presented in inferential analysis.

RESULTS

Demographic profile of the respondents

This study obtained data from 112 responses collected, 29.3% of the respondents were from governmental organisations, and 70.7% were from private organisations.

Table I Type of Organisation

Type	Percentage
Locally owned Organisation	37.5%
Foreign owned Organisation	3.0%
Multinational Organisation	16.1%
Government Organisation	22.3%
Government linked Organisation	17.0%
Non-Government Organisation	4.1%

Based on the Table 1 above, the respondents were primarily employers from various sectors: 37.5% were Locally owned Organisation, 22.3% and 17.0% were both Government and Government-linked Organisation respectively, 16.1% were Multinational Organisation, and 4.1% and 3.0% were from Foreign owned Organisation and Non-Government Organisation respectively.

Research Objective 1: To evaluate the relevance and effectiveness of English language components within compulsory university courses, faculty core courses, and intercultural communication courses in meeting employers' needs

Table II Core Language Skills Expected for Graduates and Their Organisational Relevance

Skills	Percentage
Ability to communicate confidently and effectively in English in multicultural social and professional contexts	98%
Ability to show awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity, shared norms, values and practices in intercultural interactions	96%
Ability to interact proficiently in English in multicultural contexts while maintaining mutual respect and minimizing antagonism	99%
Ability to use English to critically analyse and address issues related to intercultural communication	97%
Ability to handle differences effectively as a member of a multicultural team at local and international levels	95%
Ability to lead, motivate and inspire multicultural teams to enhance cooperation and maximize productivity	89%
Ability to strategically and methodically decode meaning in written English and re-code this meaning in the target language	90%
Ability to manage information effectively and apply life-long learning skills in multicultural professional contexts	99%
Ability to acquire and apply fundamental knowledge of human resource management and marketing in multicultural workplace interactions	92%

Table 2 summarises the responses from 112 organisations in Malaysia that highlight the importance of English language skills in a multicultural professional environment. In particular, 98% of respondents indicated that the ability to communicate confidently and effectively in English is critical for graduates. In addition, 96% of respondents emphasised the need for cultural awareness and an appreciation of Malaysia's rich ethnic diversity, which are essential for successful cross-cultural interactions. The data shows that the highest rated skill with 99% of organisations is the ability to interact competently in English while maintaining mutual

respect. This shows that fostering constructive communication between different cultures, particularly between Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups, is a high priority. Equally important, also at 99%, is the ability to manage information effectively and practise lifelong learning, both essential for adapting to the ever-evolving labour market in Malaysia.

Other highly rated skills are the ability to critically analyse cross-cultural issues (97%) and deal with differences in multicultural teams (95%). Although slightly lower, 89% of Malaysian organisations consider leadership skills to be important to motivate and inspire teams from diverse backgrounds. In addition, 90% emphasised the importance of decoding and recoding the meaning of written English, especially for tasks related to translation and intercultural communication. Finally, 92% of respondents emphasised the importance of graduates having a solid understanding of human resource management and marketing in Malaysia’s multicultural environment, highlighting the need for a blend of business management knowledge and cross-cultural communication skills.

Table III Core courses offered by the faculty and their Organisational Relevance

Subjects	Percentage
Critical Thinking	99%
Introduction to Language and Linguistics	85%
Description of English	77%
Language and Society	85%
Multimedia projects: Applied Digital Skills	94%
Writing for Academic Purposes	70%
Research Methodology	74%
Practical Training	97%
Academic Project	65%

Table 3 shows a clear emphasis on language-related courses within the programme, reflecting their importance to businesses. Critical thinking received the highest rating at 99%, indicating that companies consider this skill essential for graduates to analyse and interpret information. Practical training followed closely behind at 97%, emphasising the value of practical experience in helping students to apply their language skills in real-life contexts. Courses such as Language and Society and Introduction to Language and Linguistics both scored 85%, indicating their importance in understanding the social dynamics of language use, especially in the Malaysian context. In addition, Multimedia Projects: Applied Digital Skills scored 94%, emphasising the growing importance of digital skills for effective communication.

Writing for Academic Purposes was rated at 70% and Academic Project at 65%, showing that these courses still play an important role in the development of writing skills. Overall, the data illustrates that organisations are placing emphasis on a broad range of language-related skills within the curriculum that are essential for effective communication in a professional environment.

Table IV Core courses offered by the faculty and their Organisational Relevance

Subject/Course	Percentage
Intercultural Communication	92%
World Englishes	84%
Workplace Communication	100%
Introduction to World Cultures	74%

Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication	79%
Lexis for Intercultural Communication	67%
Cultural Perspectives in Malaysia	84%
Reading on Intercultural Issues	86%
English for Intercultural Negotiations	84%
Translation Skills	88%

The data in Table 4, which is based on the responses from 112 organisations surveyed, illustrates the relevance of the various courses in the programme. Communication in the workplace is in first place with 100%, followed by Intercultural communication with 92% and Translation skills with 88%. Reading on Intercultural Issues (86%) and World Englishes, Cultural Perspectives in Malaysia and English for Intercultural Negotiations each scored 84%. Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication (79%), Introduction to World Cultures (74%) and Lexis for Intercultural Communication (67%) were rated as less relevant.

Research Objective 2: To identify employers' recommendations for additional English language skills and courses to enhance graduates' career readiness in intercultural communication.

Table V Courses Suggested by the Organisations

Course Category	Course Suggestions	Frequency
Technical Skills	Microsoft Office Suite, Data Analytics, Digital Tools, Coding	4
Soft Skills	Communication, Leadership, Problem-Solving, Negotiation, Design Thinking	5
Specialized Skills	Business, HR, IT and Tech, Law, Arts	5
Other	Language Skills (French, Portuguese), Growth Mindset, Creativity	3

From Table 5, the qualitative data suggests a strong emphasis on technical skills, with suggestions centred on key tools such as the Microsoft Office suite, data analysis, digital tools and coding (4 suggestions). This highlights the growing demand for technology skills among graduates and highlights the need for programmes to include training in these areas to improve employability.

The frequency of suggestions for soft skills including communication, leadership, problem solving, negotiation and design thinking (5 suggestions) demonstrates the importance of interpersonal skills in the workplace. Organisations value graduates who can collaborate and lead effectively, suggesting that these skills should be at the heart of the curriculum. Furthermore, the demand for specialised skills in areas such as business, HR, IT, engineering, law and the arts (5 suggestions) suggests that businesses value niche skills that are aligned to industry needs. Degree programmes could benefit from developing bespoke courses that address the specific needs of the sector to improve graduate readiness for specialised roles.

DISCUSSION

Relevance of English Language Skills

The findings highlight the crucial role of English language courses for students in intercultural communication programmes, especially in the multicultural context of Malaysia. As English serves as a global lingua franca, English language proficiency significantly enhances students' ability to communicate across cultural and professional boundaries. This is particularly important in Malaysia where ethnic and linguistic diversity is the norm. Research consistently shows that English proficiency contributes significantly to employability in various sectors such as tourism, hospitality and technology (Ting et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2016). For example, 84% and 86% of organisational respondents considered English for Intercultural Negotiations and

Reading on Intercultural Issues, respectively, to be important, emphasizing the growing demand for language proficiency in the professional environment. Therefore, higher learning institutions in Malaysia need to combine English language education with intercultural studies to ensure that students are well prepared for the demands of a globalised workplace.

Complementing Technical Skills with Language Training

While technical expertise is becoming increasingly essential, data shows that it needs to be complemented by solid English language training. Malaysia's globalised economy requires graduates to not only have technical skills such as data analysis and proficiency in tools such as Microsoft Office, but also the ability to apply these skills in different cultural environments. Proficiency in the English language plays a key role in effectively communicating technical knowledge, especially in cross-cultural interactions. The demand for data analysis and technical writing in research reflects the growing importance of these technical skills, but they can only be optimally utilised when paired with strong communication abilities. Therefore, Malaysian university curricula should adopt a balanced approach that combines technical education with English language teaching to ensure that graduates are versatile in both the local and international job markets.

Intercultural Communication as a Core Competency

The combination of technical skills and English language courses is crucial in promoting intercultural communication, a core competency for students in Malaysia's diverse cultural landscape. Research from Bahrain and Pakistan shows that English language skills play a central role in bridging cultural differences and improving career prospects in various industries (Ali et al., 2022). In Malaysia, this competency is crucial as it enables students to manage complex cultural issues in the workplace. The survey results show that courses like Communication in the Workplace, with a 100% approval rate, are seen as essential for fostering effective communication in multi-ethnic environments. Therefore, it is crucial for educational institutions to focus on English language to develop intercultural sensitivity and adaptability - key skills for success in today's globalised economy.

Future Curriculum Development

In light of these findings, Malaysian higher learning institutions should revise their curricula to better integrate English courses with technical subjects. The demand for courses such as Microsoft Excel and Business Communications, as well as additional languages such as French and Portuguese, demonstrates the need for a multidisciplinary approach to education that reflects Malaysia's strategic position in the ASEAN region. By adopting a more coherent, interdisciplinary approach, universities can equip students with the necessary skills to succeed in a modern, multicultural workplace. Teaching English in conjunction with technical education not only improves students' knowledge but also enhances their intercultural communication skills. This holistic curriculum approach ensures that graduates are well prepared for the challenges of the globalised job market, contributing to Malaysia's economic growth and global integration.

CONCLUSION

In summary, English language proficiency is essential not only for effective intercultural communication but also for professional success in Malaysia's multicultural context. As emphasised in various studies, including Zainuddin et al. (2019) and Ting et al. (2017), English language proficiency is crucial for success in international negotiations and professional environments.

Furthermore, the integration of English language teaching with cultural studies, as mentioned by Aris (2023) and Manokaran et al. (2021), provides students with the necessary linguistic and intercultural skills. The Faculty should consider implementing a specialized training course akin to a finishing school programme, designed for students to complete before graduation. This course would concentrate on honing essential professional skills, including advanced communication techniques, industry-specific language proficiency, and intercultural awareness. By doing so, it would effectively bridge the divide between academic learning and industry demands, ensuring that graduates are well-equipped to meet the challenges and more versatile and

adaptable in the global workforce. Keeping in line with the demand from the industries, faculty should identify specific organisations to collaborate with in the long term. It is also important for the programme to continuously be involved with periodical curriculum review and to invite industry players as panels for curriculum review sessions.

Ultimately, investing in English language education is not only critical for enhancing graduates' career readiness but also serves as a strategic driver of Malaysia's economic growth and global competitiveness. Ensuring curriculum alignment is vital for university programmes to continuously evolve in response to the ever-changing demands of industries. All stakeholders, including educational institutions and policymakers, must remain committed to refining and, when necessary, eliminating irrelevant courses to better serve students' professional needs. By equipping students with strong English communication skills, Malaysian higher learning institutions can cultivate effective cross-cultural communicators, thereby elevating the country's international standing. As Pecorari and Malmström (2018) and Ishak and Mohamad (2018) have noted, English proficiency is essential for building relationships and fostering trust in cross-cultural interactions—skills that are increasingly indispensable for Malaysia's success in the global marketplace.

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