

## Connecting Language Needs in the Workplace to the Learning of English at Tertiary Level

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### ABSTRACT

Fresh graduates, it seems, lack confidence and have poor communication and English proficiency skills that could affect their employability (JobStreet.com, 2005). This paper investigates the relevance of the tertiary English language proficiency curriculum to the workplace. It is to find out if the respondents, who were mostly in the final year of their studies, are adequately prepared to use English at the workplace. This study involved four public tertiary institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. A total of 86 final year students, who were involved in industry-linkage programmes that lasted between four and six months, agreed to participate in this exercise. They came from diverse academic fields such as computer science, engineering, architecture, accounting, science, economics, communication, business, and ICT. Structured interview sessions were carried out and analysed based on content analysis. Brief descriptions about the English programmes offered at the respective tertiary institutions and comments by the respondents about the courses were also considered. Ideally, the desired outcome of any English proficiency programme is a student who can perform adequately in English in the workplace environment and is able to carry out minimum office routines such as writing brief reports, taking minutes, as well as performing formal and informal oral interactions.

**Keywords: English proficiency, workplace, communication skills, employment, graduate, tertiary English**

### INTRODUCTION

Tertiary education is often viewed as a guaranteed pathway to employment. The university is perceived now as 'an engine of change in the economy and as a means of effecting social change, especially in the field of developing human capital' (Learning Curve, *New Sunday Times*, November 25, 2007, p.H2). Meanwhile, competency factors which are related to knowledge and skills are seen as empowering undergraduates. The main vehicle for the acquisition of these competencies is language, in

particular, English, as it is a dominant language in the global context, especially in business communication (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 2006). The development of a global market and global developments in the fields of science, technology, culture, and media, which are based on what Brutt-Griffler terms as 'econcultural' grounds, lead to the increased importance of the English language (Brutt-Griffler, 2002). Given this premium on the use of English language, there is the urgency to ensure that all graduates are competently trained to meet the language needs of the workplace.

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Currently, there seems to be a growing mismatch between the requirements of the industry and the quality of graduates produced in Malaysia (NEAC, 2004, p. 19). While universities are more knowledge-based, the job market is more productivity-based. As the mismatch grows, employers are expected to continuously provide knowledge and skills to new employees through in-service training or retraining programmes. Therefore, job relevancy is crucial and universities need to reciprocate by having content relevancy.

This study serves as a response to the current focus on employability of graduates from public universities. Fresh graduates, it seems, lack confidence and have poor communication and English proficiency skills. It has been generally recognised that many graduates are disadvantaged as they lack appropriate skills to function effectively and efficiently at the workplace.

One of the main problems in English language teaching at the tertiary level is the lack of information on students' future careers and the language skills needed at work. As a result, most courses tend to concentrate on the 'common core' of the workplace to help instructors plan their lessons to cater to students' from many different disciplines (Lehtonen and Karjalainen, 2008).

### **OBJECTIVES**

This paper is part of a larger study that aims to identify the various positioning of the English language and the communicative competencies required by both employers and employees in the workplace. It also provides a strategy to match tertiary level language and communication training with specific employment sector needs in order to improve the quality and opportunity of graduates for gainful employment.

Specifically, the main concern of this paper is to identify the relevance of tertiary level English language proficiency curriculum to the workplace. It investigates if the respondents,

who are mostly in the final year of their studies, are adequately prepared to use English in their working environment.

### **SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This exploratory study involves four selected public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. It investigates the relevance of the English language proficiency programmes at the selected institutions to the workplace. The findings are discussed within the sample population of 86 randomly selected final-year students from the four institutions. Generalisations or extrapolations on the findings can only be made under similar circumstances. In spite of the limitations, the discussions and findings may provide insights into tertiary English language proficiency programmes being offered. A more comprehensive study with a bigger sample population could be considered for future studies. It is also important to realise that it is a general practice that English proficiency programmes are normally reviewed every three to five years.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Personal benefits to education are clear and are associated with higher income, prestige, better working conditions, and potential for promotion. A recent survey of public opinion in the United States found that the top-ranked role for a college to perform significantly is to prepare undergraduate students for a career (*Arnone*, 2003, p.11). As for societal benefits, human capital theory holds that knowledge education provided by tertiary institutions contribute to economic growth through the creation of new knowledge and increasing the stock of citizens who are able to implement new processes and technologies in the economy. Researchers estimate that increases in education levels account for 15 to 20 percent of the annual growth in the output for the United States (*Mortenson*, 1999).

Similarly, this value attached to higher education is also apparent in Malaysia. In fact, the fast-paced development in her economy is reflected in the rapid changes in the education system. This calls for greater accountability and improved attention to quality in education. Improving the tertiary education system should therefore be high on Malaysia's development agenda. The Malaysian tertiary institutions and policy makers must ensure that the workforce acquires the skills to compete, innovate, and respond to complex social, environmental, and economic situations.

What Malaysia needs today are higher education initiatives with a reactive agenda that can take on the challenges of strengthening human potential. Therefore, in addition to the traditional role of universities as a place to foster academic knowledge, they must also provide diversified educational resources so that students can acquire practical specialist knowledge and skills relevant to the needs of workplace. In public universities, English predominates as the language for reference and is also gaining grounds in academic tasks. In the workplace, however, the preferred language for communication is English (Ting, 2002). The parameters in language use involved can range from general to specific. Nevertheless, general English is often criticised to be inadequate for efficient functioning at the workplace. This view is linked to language use as being genre-specific, an approach that has garnered interest leading to a massive development in ESP studies. ESP involves the notion of discourse community which implies specific use of language in specific contexts.

Curriculum planning is, therefore, essential for setting educational goals, in line with preparing students for the workplace. Employability connotes the development of attributes that involve competency factors which encompass knowledge skills and competencies of doing the job in question, and other factors such as attitude, values, aspirations and ambitions, schooling, personal and life experiences (Brenan and Shah, 2003, p.20-21). Unchecked rising

unemployment among graduates is currently a national concern. A study, *The Unemployment Situation in Malaysia* (NEAC, 2004, p. 19), revealed high unemployment rates amongst Malaysian graduates which reached a number of 40,400 in November 2001. The increasing number of university graduates includes those in the 19-22 years age group. According to the NEAC report, about 8.8% of the unemployed had tertiary education in the first quarter of 2001, and by the fourth quarter, this number was substantially found to reach 13.1%. Subsequently, the rate of unemployment went up from 3.1% to 4.0%. It is estimated that this figure would rise in years to come. A reason cited for this problem is the graduates' lack of language competence. There seems to be a language mismatch between what the graduates have learned at tertiary level and the target language competencies required in the workplace.

Educational systems should create a broad understanding of the world of work, which requires a closer interaction between tertiary institutions and the workplace in curriculum development and provide packages for transition from higher public institutions to work. This not only improves the matching of knowledge skills with emerging new jobs but enhances the competitiveness of enterprises and the economy as a whole. Improving the performance of the educational system along these lines is a necessary condition for a successful delivery of vocational training and the other components of human resources development.

## METHODOLOGY

This study involves four public tertiary institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. The identity of the institutions, however, could not be revealed here. Posters were put up at all academic faculties involved in industrial training in each tertiary institution to invite respondents to participate on a voluntary basis. The period of industrial attachment was between four and six months. A total of 86 students from various disciplines had agreed to participate

in this exercise and were briefed on what was expected of them. They came from both science (N=42) and social science (N=44) academic disciplines.

The research design of this study was developed to accommodate the gathering of qualitative data. The data collection involved formal interview sessions carried out with all the respondents after they had completed their attachment at their workplace. This was to ensure that they were fully aware of the activities or routines that required the use of English at their workplace before participating in the interview. The respondents agreed to be audio-taped during the interviews. In addition, the respondents were also asked to write brief responses to the interview questions. The audio recordings were later transcribed. Field notes were also taken by the researchers and these were used for a thorough description of the interview sessions. Among others, the respondents were asked the following questions during the interview sessions:

What is the general nature of your work during the industrial training attachment?; During your industrial training, what work-related activities did you use English for?; Do you think the English language courses you attended at the university adequately prepare you for the workplace?; and, What specific areas of English language use do you feel you need to improve on in order to function well at the workplace?

In the final analysis, the respondents' feedback was discussed in relation to the English proficiency curriculum offered at their respective tertiary institutions. The feedback also provide an overview of the relevance of the curriculum in relation to the use of English in the working environment.

## DISCUSSION

There are two parts in this section. Part A presents the data on interview sessions based on the four questions posed. Part B traces the

relevance of the English programmes offered by the universities to the workplace, as indicated by the respondents.

### *Part A: Discussion on Specific Interview Questions*

Q1: What is the general nature of your work during your industrial attachment?

Generally, the respondents mentioned that they were given tasks that were related to their studies. None of them commented about being asked to do things that were not related to their areas of study. Among the tasks allocated to the respondents by their respective employers during their industrial attachment were developing systems or programs, visiting sites, quantity surveying, designing plans, preparing reports, conducting research and development activities, and providing customer service. In addition, they were also required to help with clerical work, develop multimedia presentations, audit accounts, analyse samples, assist in the planning of events and promotions, conduct QC tests, translate and edit documents. Interestingly, one of the respondents claimed that his main task was to chase after debtors.

Q2: During your industrial training what work-related activities did you use English for?

In this section, the respondents were asked to write a list of activities at the workplace that required them to use English. There was no limit given as to the number of activities to be listed.

When asked to list work-related activities during their industrial linkage that required the use of English, the respondents, in varying degrees, stated several tasks that were fully conducted in English. A total of 14% of the respondents said that all of the work-related activities in their workplace were conducted in English. The others listed several tasks that required them to use English. However, 5.8% of the respondents claimed that English was not used in their workplace at all. Incidentally, these respondents were attached to government-

TABLE 1  
Work-related activities conducted in English at the workplace

%	Item	No.
72.1	Communicating/ socialising with superiors, clients, and colleagues	1
61.6	Writing reports/ reviews/ proposals/ minutes of meeting/ correspondence/ manuals	2
37.2	Documentation/ preparing working papers/ reading, researching, keying in data	3
34.9	Developing presentations	4
34.9	Meetings/ discussions/ negotiations/ interviews	5
14	Everything work-related is in English	6
11.6	System development	7
9.3	Using computer and Internet	8
5.8	Did not use English at all	9

linked establishments. Based on Table 1, English seems to be needed most to communicate with various people at the office. A majority of the respondents (72.1%) wrote that they had to use English to communicate and socialise with their superiors, clients, and colleagues. The second activity that required the respondents (61.6%) to use English was when they were asked to write official documents such as reports, proposals, reviews, and minutes of meeting. In addition, English was also widely used by the respondents (37.2%) when they were researching and documenting.

A total of 34.9% of the respondents also listed that English was normally used when they were preparing for presentations as most of the resource materials were in English and the presentations themselves needed to be done in English. Other activities that tended to be conducted in English were meetings, discussions, negotiations, and interviews. The table clearly illustrates that English is needed in order for one to be able to function at both formal and informal situations at the workplace. A large majority of the respondents indicated that productive skills,

such as speaking (72.1%) and writing (61.6%) were important and favoured at their workplace over other skills.

Q3: Do the English courses at the university adequately prepare you for the workplace?

In this section, the respondents were asked to give their opinions on the adequacy of the English language courses provided by their respective universities in preparing them for the workplace. The term ‘adequate’ here means that the skills and knowledge that they have gained from these courses are useful and relevant for them to function well at the workplace.

Table 2 shows that 60.5% of the respondents in this research felt that the English language courses offered during their studies at the university level had adequately prepared them for the workplace. While the figure may seem to be rather satisfactory, upon a closer look at the responses, it is clear that there were other factors stated by the respondents that contributed to this outlook. Some of them said ‘yes’ but added that the fact that their major courses

TABLE 2  
The adequacy of English courses in catering to workplace needs

	U1	U2	U3	U4	Total	%
Adequate	9	12	9	22	52	60.5
Inadequate	13	9	12	0	34	39.5
Grand total					86	100



were also conducted in English could have contributed towards their ability to use English at their workplace. Only five respondents agreed that the English language courses alone helped them to function better at their workplace in English. Several respondents (N=12) felt that the language courses taken during their studies had provided adequate practices in conversation skills, while a small number (N=6) stated that the report writing and presentation courses were very important and provided practical value.

There were also other factors that assisted them to converse in English at the workplace. These include reading materials and course books that are in English, the realization that English is an important language to master in order to survive in their respective working environment, and personal encouragements from their lecturers. Several respondents (N=11), however, felt that the language courses were only helpful where very basic conversational and written English language skills were needed.

A total of 39.5% of the respondents stated that the language courses they attended at the university did not adequately prepare them for the workplace. One of the reasons given was that the level of the courses was too low and almost similar to the secondary school level. Hence, the courses did not help them much. Another reason given tells a different story. Most respondents (N=21) felt the courses were inadequate since they were only allowed to take a few courses. In addition, some respondents (N=7) also complained that the amount of practice time spent in class was too little because most of the time was used up by their lecturers. It was also reported that some of these instructors did not use English throughout the lessons, which led to the students not having good language models to emulate.

Another reason provided by the respondents concerns the lack of focus given by the courses offered. It seems that there was too much focus on reading comprehension, role playing, and spontaneous speaking while not enough attention was given to speaking skills and practice. In addition, English language courses are not

compulsory in some institutions. For instance, two institutions even prevented students whom they classified as being good enough in English from taking English classes, and this was probably due to the lack of financial allocation and staffing. This decision, however, may have a detrimental effect on the students' performance in the language at the workplace.

Q4: What specific areas do you feel you need to improve on to function well at the workplace?

The following discussion focuses on the respondents' feedback on the English language skills that they felt they needed to improve on to be able to perform better at their workplace.

Table 3 shows that 86% of the respondents indicated that they need to work on their speaking skills more now that they have experienced the training stint at the workplace. In this case, they mentioned that the public speaking skills were paramount in instilling confidence to deliver an effective oral presentation. In a similar vein, negotiation and discussion skills were also seen as the areas that they would like to improve on before embarking on a real work experience after their graduation. These responses could be an indication to institutions of higher learning to provide some focus on speaking skills rather than on other skills. However, this does not mean that the other skills are less important or should be neglected.

TABLE 3  
English language skills that need to be improved on

%	Item	No.
86	Speaking	1
43	Writing	2
40.7	Grammar	3

A total of 43% felt that they needed to improve on their writing skills as they realized that there were quite a number of writing tasks involved in their day-to-day routines at their respective places of work.

Another point of contention is grammar, where 40.7% of the respondents believed that a better grasp of the English grammar rules would have made their industrial-linkage experience a better one. Furthermore, they felt that a sound knowledge of grammar would have provided them with the confidence boost that they needed as a new addition to the establishment.

Interestingly, a few respondents commented that more exposure to the actual office environment would have helped them to improve their English ability as they would have the opportunity to use English in a real environment.

*Part B: The Relevance of English Language Programmes*

This section discusses the relevance of English language programmes offered at four selected Malaysian tertiary institutions. As noted earlier in the section on scope and limitations, the following discussion merely provides some indications of the relevance of the English language programmes. A more comprehensive and in-depth study is still needed to be undertaken so that the results can be further extrapolated. Generally, English language proficiency courses conducted at all public tertiary institutions follow the 14-week semester system. The average class size for an English language proficiency course is between 20 and 30 students and the types of English language proficiency courses offered include General English, ESP (English for Special Purposes), EAP (English for Academic Purposes), and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes).

Some of the more common courses for each type include: (1) *EAP* – Academic Writing, Report Writing, Reading for Academic Purposes, Presentation Skills; (2) *ESP* – Business Correspondence, Technical Writing, English for Legal Purposes; (3) *EOP* – Spoken English for Professionals, Interview Skills, Professional Correspondence, and Public Speaking.

**University 1 (U1)**

At U1, two English language courses are designated as the university core courses of three credits each (total 6 credits) and they must be taken by all undergraduates, after which they do their elective courses. The two core courses are Oral Interaction Skills and General Writing Skills. In addition to these two courses, faculties may also require and designate their students to take other English language courses. These courses could be any of the courses listed as follows: English for Academic Purposes, Skills in Grammar, Reading and Discussion Skills, Writing for Academic Purposes, English for Workplace, Interactive Speaking, Report Writing, Business English, and Public Speaking.

The courses at U1 also focus on both the writing and speaking skills, i.e. the productive skills. Different faculties have different requirements, for example, the medical school insists on their students to take English courses although these students may not need them. The English requirements, therefore, are not instituted across the board. The university policy states that students must take two compulsory courses.

*Adequacy Report*

Table 4 discusses the respondents’ feedback on the adequacy of English courses at University 1.

TABLE 4  
Adequacy of English courses at U1

Total	Inadequate	Adequate
22 (100%)	13 (60%)	9 (40%)

Generally, a slight majority of the respondents (60%) did not agree that the language courses offered by U1 had adequately prepared them for the workplace. Some stated that other English language experiences during their studies. For example, more contact hours

with the English language as the medium of instruction for some major courses were more influential in giving them the practices they needed to prepare themselves for the industrial-linkage. Others felt that the contents covered in these courses were too basic, for instance, one of the respondents mentioned that the ‘Skills in Grammar’ course did not prepare him for the ‘real world,’ when he realised that his English ‘is really broken’ when he conversed in English at the workplace.

Forty percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that the language courses offered by U1 had adequately prepared them for the workplace. Some of them commented that the courses had helped by exposing them to the different speaking and writing tasks that were needed to be done at the workplace. One respondent said that the ‘Interactive Speaking’ and ‘Writing for Academic Purposes’ courses provided him the opportunity to apply what had been learnt in these courses to the day-to-day running of his training session. Nevertheless, several respondents still felt that although the courses were adequate, there were still certain areas of the language that could be improved further. There seemed to be a consensus among all the respondents at U1 that they themselves needed to take their own initiatives to improve themselves further as the courses could not prepare them for everything.

*Skills Needed*

Table 5 shows an overwhelming majority (77.3%) of the respondents expressing their desire to improve on their speaking skills. The skills mentioned include the ability to hold a conversation with colleagues, superiors, and clients more fluently. Some respondents

TABLE 5  
Skills needed at U1

%	Skills	No.
77.3	Speaking	1
27.3	Writing	2
22.8	Grammar	3

expressed their embarrassment for not being able to speak in a concise and clear manner when dealing with their superiors. In addition, presentation skills were also a great concern among these respondents. They believed that they needed to work on their confidence level when standing in front of an audience. Other examples of the areas that the respondents felt needed to be improved on before entering the job market at the end of their studies were grammar (22.8%), writing (27.3%), and vocabulary (9.1%).

**University 2 (U2)**

At U2, the English language courses are faculty-specific, where each faculty designates courses relevant for their students. The students are not required to register for any specified general English courses. The range of English proficiency courses offered includes English for Business, English for Social Sciences, English for Science and Technology, English for Information Technology, English for Law, English for Life Sciences, English for Engineering, English for Nursing, English for Islamic Studies, Speech Communication, Public Speaking, Interactive Reading Skills, Technical Report Writing, Critical Reading, and English for Hospitality Purposes.

*Adequacy Report*

Table 6 discusses the respondents’ feedback on the adequacy of English courses at University 2.

TABLE 6  
Adequacy of English courses at U2

Total	Inadequate	Adequate
21 (100%)	9 (42.9%)	12 (57.1%)

Based on the survey done on U2 industrial linkage programme, it can be seen that 57.1% of the respondents claimed that they were satisfied with the English language courses



provided by the university as a preparation for their workplace experience. All of them felt that the courses provided the right type of contents, especially the public speaking module that allowed them to function fairly well at the workplace. Nevertheless, the respondents collectively agreed that more still needed to be done to prepare themselves for working life as far as English language ability was concerned because whatever that were provided might be right but not adequate enough for them to operate efficiently and fluently in an English working environment.

Still, 42.9% of the respondents claimed that the courses were not adequate at all. One respondent gave a resounding ‘absolutely no’ when asked whether the courses adequately prepared him for the workplace. The respondent cited two courses, ‘English for Science and Technology’ and ‘Speech Communication’, as being ‘rather disappointing’ because of their low standard of English and their lack of focus on certain skills. Another respondent presented a totally new dilemma when he claimed that the courses were not useful at all to him as his workplace did not use English at all. Instead, a Malay dialect was constantly used which made the respondent’s life quite miserable as he did not have a working knowledge of that particular dialect.

*Skills Needed*

Table 7 indicates that, just like U1, the respondents from U2 also needed speaking skills in order to function well at the workplace. Even though their experience during their industrial linkage was relatively short, 90.5% of the respondents expressed the desire to improve their communication skills to communicate with

their superiors, colleagues, and clients. A total of 47.6% also pointed out that report writing was one of the major writing tasks that they needed to perform during their training stints. The other skills which were also mentioned include grammar skills, and negotiation and discussion skills.

**University 3 (U3)**

When the data was being collected for this study in late 2007, U3 offered intensive generic English courses (integrated skills) as electives to all students. The enrolment into proficiency English courses in U3 was neither compulsory nor encouraged by the faculty and this was most probably due to inadequate staffing and funding. Nevertheless, the university acknowledged the importance of these courses and attempted to compensate for this need by providing extra activities at the colleges during weekends and also introducing formal programmes during the longer holidays. These activities, however, were not part of the students’ curriculum and graduation requirements.

However, starting from the 2008/09 session, U3 has offered English for communication programme. Although the courses are not compulsory for all registered students at U3, they are encouraged to register for these courses as electives. Some of the new elective courses are Academic Reading in English, Business and Professional Correspondence in English, Report Writing for Business and Professional Purposes, Vocabulary for the Social Sciences, Academic Writing in English, Communication for Employment Purposes, Speaking English with Confidence, and Spoken English for Professionals.

U3 also provides faculty-tailored English proficiency courses. The courses include Professional Writing for Computer Sciences, English for Biomedical Sciences, English for Pharmacist, English for Nurses, and English Proficiency for Law. In addition, a course called English for Enhancement that focuses on grammar is compulsory for all first year students. At the end of the 14-week semester, students

TABLE 7  
Skills needed at U2

%	Skills	No.
90.5	Speaking	1
47.6	Writing	2
23.8	Grammar	3

will sit for an English language proficiency test, whereby those who obtain lower than a C grade must repeat the programme.

*Adequacy Report*

Table 8 discusses the respondents' feedback on the adequacy of English courses at University 3.

TABLE 8  
Adequacy of English courses at U3

Total	Inadequate	Adequate
21 (100%)	12 (57.2%)	9 (42.8%)

A total of 42.8% of the respondents stated that the English language courses at their university provided adequate preparation for the workplace. However, more than half of them (57.2%) stated otherwise. Some of them even lamented the fact that they were denied the opportunity to take an English course prior to their training stint as the courses would only be offered in their final year at the institution. This, they said, was a case of too little too late. Nonetheless, the introduction of the new programme at the start of 2008/2009 academic year as mentioned above may yield a more positive response.

*Skills Needed*

Table 9 illustrates the skills that the respondents needed in order to operate better at the workplace. A total of 72.2% respondents mentioned that courses which could help them to improve their speaking skills would be very welcomed.

TABLE 9  
Skills needed at U3

%	Skills	No.
72.2	Speaking	1
42.9	Writing	2
23.8	Grammar	3

Similarly, the respondents from U3, like the respondents from U1 and U2, also ranked writing skills (42.9%) and grammar skills (23.8%) respectively as the second and third skills that they most wanted to improve on after experiencing the working environment provided by their industrial linkage outing. Interestingly, only 4.8% of the respondents felt that they needed to work on their listening and reading skills.

**University 4 (U4)**

U4 diploma students are required to take three levels of English courses by the end of their second year of study. These proficiency courses emphasize the integration of grammar and the four language skills. Each level comprises six credit hours per week, taught over 14 weeks. In total, the students are required to take 18 credit hours of English. All students must obtain a minimum grade C in order to proceed to the next level. Those who fail to obtain a C grade are required to repeat the course. If a student fails any of the English courses three times, his candidacy could be terminated.

Those in the degree programmes have to take skill- or content-based courses (ESP) which range from 2 to 4 credit hours per week. Each faculty determines the type of courses and the number of hours that the students have to take during the course of their studies. Officially, the students have to take two levels of the courses as stipulated.

*Adequacy Report*

Table 10 discusses the respondents' feedback on the adequacy of English courses at University 4.

TABLE 10  
Adequacy of the English courses at U4

Total	Inadequate	Adequate
22 (100%)	0 (0%)	22 (100%)

Data from U4 gave an interesting reading as all of the respondents interviewed were satisfied with the English language courses offered at their institution. Many of them gave positive remarks about how the courses had prepared them for the workplace. This phenomenon at U4 could be due to several reasons. Firstly, U4 students were exposed to more contact hours with English compared to the students from other institutions involved in this study. Secondly, since English is, unofficially, the medium of instruction at this institution, most of the courses were conducted in English. This naturally increased the number of contact hours the students have with English.

*Skills Needed*

While the respondents at U4 were appreciative of the English courses provided by their institution, they also agreed that more could still be done to improve their skills. Their confidence in using English during the interview sessions was also noted. However, upon a closer scrutiny, accuracy in terms of the knowledge of grammar rules and word choice was still a major obstacle. Table 11 shows that 87.6% of the respondents needed to improve their speaking skills. A total of 54.2% placed grammar as an area that they were still lacking in and therefore needed to be worked on before entering the job market. As much as 45.4% of the respondents felt that they needed more ESP courses to provide them with the necessary vocabulary to function effectively at the workplace. Writing skills, however, did not seem to feature highly for these respondents.

TABLE 11  
Skills needed at U3

%	Skills	No.
87.6	Speaking	1
54.2	Grammar	2
45.4	Vocabulary	3
20.8	Writing	4

**IMPLICATIONS FOR LINGUISTIC INITIATIVES**

The data from this study clearly indicate that a ‘gap’ exists between the workplace and pedagogical resources. Forey (2004), for example, discovered that students’ interpretations of workplace materials often diverged substantially from the researcher/ teacher’s and from those of the material writers. The language and communication training programmes at tertiary institutions, thus, remain to be shaped, and there are many actions and initiatives that can help to shape them into a meaningful and positive direction, especially, in terms of preparing graduates for the workplace.

Clusters of language and communication activities may be derived together with the importance of the different language skills used for the execution of the different activities. The patterning of the activities and the language skills will allow a further match for informed decisions that will help the graduates to realise their needs. For example, those entering the financial service sector must recognise negotiation skills which include making proposals, making counter arguments, making concessions, bargaining, and making small talk.

The content analysis of the interview sessions highlights the relevance, adequacy, and efficiency of the courses offered in selected tertiary institutions that reflect the current practice in English language training and preparation of graduates for gainful employment. Currently, tertiary institutions do not follow rigid guidelines as to how their English language programmes are designed to meet and match industry needs. Much of the design could be described as intuitive and independent of the market desires for graduate employability.

Therefore, those responsible for the planning of English language training should be open to new design approaches. Changes in the employment sector will also have a direct impact on higher education, and vice-versa, so the symbiotic cooperation between the two sectors still needs to be explored and strengthened. The

main concern here is to prepare students for the twenty-first century workplace by developing strong speaking and writing skills. Instructional considerations may include the following:

- discussing topical issues in a classroom debate format
- providing opportunities for formal and informal oral interactions
- implementing strategies for writing for specific audience that is required of the workplace
- developing writing fluency and individual writing styles through frequent journal writing
- providing a grammar programme which emphasizes standardised or formal English

### CONCLUSION

It seems that no pre-packaged language course can sufficiently prepare tertiary level students for diverse communicative competence in the workplace. This diversity is associated with the challenges involved in providing a more focused development of language skills that are appropriate for specific workplace communities. The data in this study obviously provide support for the need for a focused development of workplace specific competency-based language skills. Findings of the study point towards the development of a context-sensitive model of communicative competence that relates to the real world of work.

Similarly, the data clearly indicate that speaking skills are the skills which are mostly needed to enable graduates to perform effectively and efficiently at the workplace. An overwhelming majority of the tasks being performed at workplaces require a high degree of speaking ability. At the same time, writing ability is also rated highly.

While most of the respondents claimed that the English language courses offered by their respective universities had adequately prepared them for the workplace, some of them felt that

more still needed to be done. Some suggestions include increasing the number of contact hours, lengthening the period of industrial linkage, including more challenging tasks and activities in the language courses to match the workplace environment, and ensuring that only qualified instructors are engaged to teach these courses.

In conclusion, there is a great need to address the problem of employability, specifically the lack of English language skills among Malaysian public university graduates. Language is a crucial element of workplace communication and must be defined as a key competence area. A programme that helps promote language and communication training linked to job-related workplace designed to help students meet their future employment must be in place. This training project should especially target those who need to improve their language skills in order to increase their chances of employability.

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