

English language and graduate employability

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the perspectives of Malaysian employers and students on the need for English language proficiency and skills for employment.

Design/methodology/approach – Interviews were conducted with employers from various organisations. Additionally, questionnaires were disseminated to undergraduates at four public universities in Malaysia. These were done to ascertain the perspectives of different stakeholders on the importance of English in securing employment, the effect of a marked regional accent or dialect on employability and industry's expectations and requirements for new employees.

Findings – Employers and students agree that English plays a major role in employability. Whilst there was general agreement by both parties that good grammar and a wide range of vocabulary are important, the findings indicated several mismatches in terms of students' perceptions and employers' expectations. Among them is the use of the colloquial form of English at the workplace which was not favoured by employers. Employers also generally felt that knowledge of different types of writing styles could be learnt on-the-job. Furthermore, employers pointed out other essential skills for employability: the ability to communicate in other languages, confidence and a good attitude.

Practical implications – Cognisant of the fact that English is essential in improving employability, initiatives to improve the level of English among Malaysian students must continue to be put in place. University students should be made aware of the different language skills sought by employers early in their university education. The mismatches between the perceptions of university students and the expectations of employers should be considered when planning English language courses and degree programmes. More structured feedback from industry on both would help to better prepare students for the world of work and to ease the transition from campus to career.

Social implications – In relation to graduate employability, these English-language elite groups would have an advantage in securing employment especially in multinational companies, and this will, in a long run, create a larger gap between students from the international and public schools.

Originality/value – With the standpoint of two important parties, employers and students, a more comprehensive idea of the effect of English language on employability has been obtained.

Keywords Malaysia, Universities, English language, Higher education, Graduate employability

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The concept of employability in itself is a fluid “multi-dimensional construct” (Finch *et al.*, 2013, p. 683). In the context of graduate employability (GE), Yorke (2006, p. 8) defines employability as “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy”. However, the relationship between graduates having the skills or attributes and them being employable is not a simple one (Tomlinson, 2017).



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Despite this, GE is often used as a measure to rank higher education institutions (HEIs) all over the world, thus, making it an important agenda in these institutions. Quacquarelli Symonds, for instance, has a GE ranking table to evaluate employability among HEIs (Intelligence Unit, 2016). Such publicly available rankings are in turn used by potential students when selecting HEIs, and this may subsequently affect the funding provided to HEIs. It has been reported that in the UK “two out of the top three reasons for applying to study are employment related” (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011) report on GE support, p. 18). This is similar to findings from a more recent survey conducted by Hobsons (2017). The study, comprising 62,366 students from 65 universities worldwide, found that “a high graduate employment rate” is among the top four reasons for choosing a degree programme to study at a university (Hobsons, 2017, p. 7).

In Malaysia, GE was an important agenda in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan launched in 2007, and it continues to be a national agenda in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education). GE is used as a measure to help teachers to effectively prepare students for the workforce, and who can meet the needs of the country’s economy. The target for GE, as expressed in the Blueprint, is to achieve more than 80 per cent GE (from 75 per cent in 2014). Based on the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012–2017 (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012), GE is linked to the ability of graduates to obtain employment: in an area related to their field of study; based on their level of qualifications; and at a salary consistent with the market rate for entry-level graduates in their chosen fields.

Similar to the situation in the UK (Cranmer, 2007), the employability of graduates in Malaysia is measured by their ability to obtain employment approximately six months after they leave university (Lim, 2008). The 2010 GE for public and private higher education providers including polytechnics and community colleges was 75.4 per cent (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2011). In 2017, the employability rate was 79.1 per cent (KPT Report Card: Producing employable graduates). Nevertheless, it should be noted that these figures are based on an online survey administered at the point of graduation, and thus, may not reflect the actual GE percentage.

One of the stumbling blocks for graduates to obtain employment at entry level in Malaysia is a poor command of English (Survey by Manpower Inc. 2008 as cited in Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012, p. 9). A similar finding was reported based on a survey conducted by TalentCorp and the World Bank (World Bank, 2014, p. 24) where a lack of communication skills was cited as a major hindrance to hiring local graduates by 81 per cent of employers surveyed. This is supported by another study, this time by Jobstreet.com (2015), which conducted a survey among 472 clients, managers and senior managers across industries in Malaysia. The survey found that a poor command of English is one of the top five reasons fresh graduates are not hired. In fact, surveys keep citing the lack of English proficiency as among the top reasons for graduate unemployability (e.g. Malaysian Employers Federation, 2016). This link between English language proficiency (ELP) and employability is a main push factor in recent policies aimed at improving the ELP of students, such as the English Language Roadmap 2015–2025 (English Language Standards and Quality Council, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). This Roadmap cuts across all levels of education and uses the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as a common framework to align the English language curricula for preschool, primary, secondary, tertiary and teacher education. Based on the CEFR, language proficiency is measured on a scale of A1 (basic user) to C2 (proficient user). The Roadmap makes constant reference to the 2013 Cambridge Baseline Study encompassing 943 or about 10 per cent of primary and secondary schools in Malaysia (Robinson *et al.*, 2014, p. 41). The findings of the study show a worrying trend of low levels of English proficiency, where at the end of five years of secondary school, i.e. at the Form 5 level, more than half of the students are only at the lower levels of CEFR A1

and A2, while at Form 6 (pre-university), 41 per cent of the students are at this level (Robinson *et al.*, 2014, p. 232). It was also found that 48 per cent of the teachers were at the level of B2 and below (Robinson *et al.*, 2014, p. 280). This is why teacher education has also been included in the Roadmap, as there appears to be a link between the poor proficiency levels among students and the teachers' own proficiency. The English Language Roadmap has set targets for each level of education, which are to be achieved by 2025. The ultimate goal is for students to leave higher education with a B2 (approximately IELTS Band 5 to 6.5) or C1 (approximately IELTS Band 6.5 to 8) level of English as these levels are what employers tend to expect.

The importance placed on English in a multilingual context, where Malay is the official language of Malaysia, can be explained by the fact that English is still widely used in the private sector. Briguglio's (2003) study of patterns of English language usage in two multinational companies in Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong shows that both written and spoken forms were found to be important for effective communication with international clients. In another study, Phang (2006) found that employers in the engineering field paid attention to the English language skills of their potential employees during recruitment interviews. If these candidates possess limited English oral communication skills, they may miss an opportunity to be hired. Therefore, the lack of English proficiency makes it harder for graduates to get the job that they want. This negative relationship between proficiency and employability is likely to affect Malaysia's vision to be a high-income nation by the year 2020 (Pillai, *et al.*, 2012). This notion echoes the human capital theory, which stipulates that individual earnings are determined by human capital endowments, where educational attainment is highly regarded. For graduates in Malaysia wanting to secure a job with compatible earnings, ELP is deemed to be an important human capital. Yet, industry is not homogenous, and thus, the need for English language is likely to differ from industry to another. Furthermore, in a multilingual context like Malaysia, and with businesses going regional if not global, there is already a demand for graduates with multilingual skills.

Apart from job-related needs for English, there is an underlying expectation that university graduates, by virtue of their level of education, should be proficient in English. This can be related to Malaysia's historical links with the UK. During the British presence in the Malaya and Borneo, English-medium schools were set up, and were regarded as being more prestigious than vernacular schools. Even after independence in 1957, it was not until the late 1960s that English-medium schools were phased out. Even universities had to start using Malay as the medium of instruction. Malay gradually replaced English in education and public administration, and English became a compulsory subject taught in schools. Sixty years on, there are still complaints about how Malaysians used to be able to speak English so well compared to at present. Many employers in the private sector continue to use English, rather than the national language, Malay, as a gatekeeping tool for recruitment. This creates a situation where graduates who come from English-speaking homes, or have been educated abroad, or at private universities locally, or who attended private and international schools have an advantage. In general, the majority of public university graduates do not come from English-speaking homes, and tend to come from non-urban areas in Malaysia. This creates a socio-economic dimension to the relationship between English and employability which may not just be unique to Malaysia but to other countries where English is not the majority language, but has a high currency where employment is concerned. Interestingly, Singh and Singh (2008) found that the employers in their study seemed to prefer graduates from public universities as they felt that these graduates possessed the required academic knowledge and employability skills. Their study also examined the perceptions of employers and graduates of important GE skills. It was found that graduates rated their skills as being higher compared to the employers' rating of their skills. However, there was no difference in the order of importance of graduates' skills and the order perceived by employers.

In relation to English, what terms like being “proficient” and “competent” refer to in relation to employability is not always specified. For instance, Ishak *et al.* (2006) found that the industrial sector looks for candidates with good language competence: the ability to generate and express ideas verbally in English (90 per cent), to give presentations in English (90 per cent), to write reports in English (60 per cent), to speak English fluently (60 per cent), to have a good command of English grammar (30 per cent) and to have persuasive skills in English (30 per cent). Competence can also be seen in terms of communicative skills, which refers to the ability to effectively present ideas with confidence in both oral and written form (Zaharim *et al.*, 2010). Other aspects of proficiency and competency may include the ability to speak in comprehensible sentences, give clear directions and ask questions (Zaharim *et al.*, 2010). In other words, what constitutes proficiency and competency may differ from one employer to another. What is currently lacking is a clear understanding of what employers mean and need with regard to ELP and skills. Unpacking these terms from employers’ perspectives can help Institutes of Higher Education prepare their students better for the job market. This is why we sought to examine the role of English in relation to employability with a focus on the requirements of employers as perceived by different parties including students and employers in Malaysia. With these insights, the findings from this study can add to findings from previous studies, such as Singh and Singh (2008), and contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the employability skills of graduates, particularly in the Malaysian context.

Methodology

This study used the sequential exploratory mixed method design, which started from qualitative data collection through interviews, followed by quantitative data gathering through a questionnaire (Creswell, 2009). In order to understand the perception of employability of different stakeholders, individual face-to-face interviews with the employers were conducted, while questionnaires were distributed to students. The interviews were conducted before designing the questionnaire in order to get a general view of stakeholders’ perception on the employability of graduates. The collection of data involved two phases. The first phase was carried out over a period of three months. After obtaining their written consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 human resource personnel and managers from 12 organisations including government agencies, statutory bodies, government-linked companies, small and medium enterprises, multinational companies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The interview prompts were designed to explore the industry’s perspectives on English and employability, in particular their expectations and requirements for new graduate employees. The issues discussed included the importance of English for getting a job, the importance of English proficiency in recruitment, the acceptance of other varieties of English at the workplace and soft skills needed for employment. The recorded interviews were then transcribed orthographically. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview data. It started by coding the interview transcripts based on pre-set values. This means that the codes used were theory driven and were further categorised to form themes. Then, layering of themes was done to identify the major and minor themes.

The second phase of data collection involved the dissemination of questionnaires to undergraduates: 97 third-year students and 255 final-year students from the faculties of engineering, computer science, social sciences and education at four public universities, three in Peninsular Malaysia, and one in East Malaysia. The four faculties were selected because they were the main undergraduate programmes offered at the respective universities. To obtain approval for research in the universities, the researchers approached the respective heads of academic faculties/departments. These included the senior registrar, the academic manager and programme coordinator. After being given the permission to distribute the questionnaire, several lecturers were introduced to the researchers, and the

researchers were brought to their respective classes to meet the students. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to students who were willing to take part in the research, and 352 of the completed questionnaires were returned (88 per cent return rate).

Third and final year students were selected, as they would be leaving the university within the next two years and are likely to be more concerned about their employability levels compared to first- and second-year students. Students from four faculties were selected based on their availability to complete the questionnaires. The students signed a consent form attached to the questionnaire, which informed them of the purpose of the survey, and that participation was voluntary. The consent form also stated that participants had the choice of opting out of participating in the study at any time. Table I illustrates the demographic information of the participants. The participants' identity was protected throughout the study.

The main purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate whether there is a mismatch between the students' perceptions on GE and industry's expectations, specifically in connection with the significance of English in the job market. Similar to the issues discussed in the interview, the questionnaire focused on the importance of English and employability, ELP of graduates, acceptance of Malaysian varieties of English and the soft skills required for employment. Based on the responses of the employers, 20 statements were formulated using a six-point Likert scale. The frequencies and cumulative percentages of the responses were calculated and analysed.

Findings

English and employability

Almost all the respondents agreed that the ability to communicate in English is an essential skill to gain employment. The findings indicate that employers believe that this ability is vital for graduates to be employed as all the employers interviewed considered English as a passport to employment. This is also evidenced by the findings from the questionnaire. The percentage of the importance of English in employment is illustrated in Table II. A total of 96 per cent of the students felt that English is important to get a job in their field of study.

Gender	Age group	Year level	Number of students	Faculty	University
Male: 36.4%	21–31	3rd year: 27.6%	33 (9.4%)	Engineering	UM
Female: 63.6%		Final year: 72.4%	11 (3.1%)	Computer science	UPM
			106 (30.1%)	Social science and Education	UMS
			202 (57.4%)	Engineering and Education	UTM

Note: The percentage of students whose age range is from 28 to 31 is 4 per cent

Table I.
Student respondents'
demographic
information (total
number of
participants: 352)

	Frequency	%
<i>Valid</i>		
Strongly disagree	6	1.7
Disagree	4	1.1
Tend to disagree	4	1.1
Tend to agree	21	6.0
Agree	129	36.6
Strongly agree	188	53.4
Total	352	100.0

Table II.
The importance of
English in
employability
according to student
respondents

This finding is consistent with reports on GE in Malaysia as highlighted earlier in this paper. English is the *lingua franca* in multinational corporations since they deal with an international client base. This was emphasised by an employer:

English is an international language and if you are joining this company, which is a multinational company, you have to speak English even if the English is not a high-level English.

Additionally, English is regarded as the main language of communication in global business. Industry personnel commented that since employees' skills reflect on the reputation of the organisation, candidates who can communicate in intelligible English are considered more employable. The ability to communicate in English is an entry requirement for most jobs in multinational and local organisations. A human resource manager explained that English is necessary for employees to communicate, argue and discuss their ideas during presentations or meetings. Even in a technical field like engineering, the nature of work has changed a lot. Thus, it was pointed out that engineers today cannot just sit behind a desk to develop a product. Instead, they also have to introduce and sell their ideas and products, usually in English. Therefore, if employees have a limited grasp of the language, it will be difficult for them to function effectively in their job. Students who took part in the survey were also in agreement with industry's focus on the need for English as over 90 per cent of them were aware that good English communication skills are one of the prerequisites for employment.

In terms of communication, the ability to express oneself fluently in English is important for employers. However, as expressed by a human resource general manager of a multinational corporation, potential employees need not possess an excellent command of the English language. Nevertheless, they must be competent users of the language in order to interact with international collaborators and clients.

English language proficiency skills

Most degree programmes in Malaysian universities require students to have a minimum score of Band 3 (modest user of English) in the Malaysian University English Test to gain admission. Band 3 is roughly equivalent to a lower level of B1 in the CEFR. On the whole, the standard of English among undergraduates is perceived to be less than desirable, consistent with the findings from the various surveys we reported earlier. Generally, the employers who were interviewed asserted that the English proficiency of fresh graduates is rather low. Thus, in order to employ the most suitable candidate, human resource personnel make their selection during the recruitment interview or via written assessment. This allows them to gauge the candidate's level of English proficiency.

A personnel officer from a news agency pointed out that there is a preference for applicants who are fluent in the language, and who can use the language with accuracy, e.g. in terms of grammar. This criterion is even advertised in job recruitment advertisements. The percentage of hiring those who are proficient in English is as high as 60 per cent. As it is a news agency, it is inevitable that candidates are expected to demonstrate ample competence in the language. Candidates are evaluated based on their English writing skills in a written test as well as their oral communication skills during their recruitment interview. For such an organisation, greater importance is placed on writing rather than speaking skills.

Similarly, another employee of a newspaper-publishing company also revealed that applicants are expected to write well in English. Their speaking skills are not deemed to be as important since they produce news in the written form. As these two organisations focus on delivering news to the public through the written form, the preference is for candidates who possess good English writing skills with a high level of proficiency.

In contrast, an employer from a service-based organisation said that English oral communication skills are central to the operations of their company as they often converse

with their international clients. Therefore, more importance is placed on English speaking skills. Nonetheless, graduates who are proficient in English, and who are adept in all four skills, reading, writing, speaking and listening, have a better chance of being employed. These skills are seen as assets to the organisation.

Results from the questionnaire also show that the students felt that speaking and writing skills are important and a prerequisite in securing a job. More than 88 per cent of the students were of the opinion that some organisations incorporate written assessments as part of their employee selection process. Students thought that the ability to write in appropriate grammar and correct sentence structure as well as knowledge of different genres of writing are valued by employers. However, a representative from a local property developer said that the ability to produce different types of written texts is not essential as new employees will eventually acquire the knowledge through experience. For example, the ability to write a convincing report of a particular project can be developed over time.

Basic knowledge of English

Personnel of different organisations concurred that a basic knowledge of English, for instance, comprehension of simple vocabulary and grammar, is a job requirement and it boosts employability. One human resource manager disclosed that job applicants are not expected to have flawless grammar or sophisticated vocabulary, but they are expected to use English at a modest level at the very least. To substantiate this point, the manager recounted incidents where applicants were immediately rejected at job interviews because they switched to Malay because of their inability to express themselves in simple English. The main concern for this particular organisation and manager was spoken English.

The staff members from the news agency and newspaper-publishing firm, on the other hand, focus on written English. They require candidates to possess sufficient knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary in their writing as this affects the quality of the product, and subsequently the reputation of these organisations. Similarly, students who participated in the survey mostly agreed that there is a need for knowledge of basic English grammar and a sufficient range of vocabulary to successfully attain a job as glossed in Table III. The results indicate that approximately 94 per cent of the students perceived good grammatical knowledge to be important for securing a job. The vast majority of students (approximately 97 per cent) are also aware that graduates need a wide range of English vocabulary to enhance their level of employability.

Use of the colloquial variety of English

Since Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multilingual country, one part of the interview focused on the employers' opinions towards ethnically and regionally marked pronunciation and

	English grammar		Vocabulary	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<i>Valid</i>				
Strongly disagree	5	1.4	4	1.1
Disagree	9	2.6	9	2.6
Tend to disagree	7	2.0	2	0.6
Tend to agree	33	9.4	29	8.2
Agree	183	52.0	189	53.7
Strongly agree	115	32.7	119	33.8
Total	352	100.0	352	100.0

Table III.
The need for
knowledge of basic
English grammar and
sufficient vocabulary
according to student
respondents

how these features might have an effect on the way candidates are evaluated during job interviews. Several employers particularly those from multinational organisations expressed that a marked Malaysian accent may sometimes influence hiring decisions. One employer said that:

(A) local accent is okay in local firms but we are [*sic.*] billion-dollar company, we are sending people overseas. I cannot afford to send [*sic.*] with that kind of accent. We don't want to be embarrassed.

If the candidates speak with a marked accent, there is a lower tendency of them being accepted for a position in a company. Employers, especially those from the private sector, confirmed this. In the case of job interviews, it has been found that intelligibility, including pronunciation, accent and dialect, are determining factors for employability. Research studies in countries such as Australia, Germany, the UK and the USA (Cargile, 2000; Carlson and McHenry, 2006; Rakić *et al.*, 2011; Harrison, 2013) show that factors affecting an interviewee's chance of being employed include accent or dialect, standard pronunciation and comprehensibility. Candidates who have a marked accent are perceived to be less cultured, and to a certain extent, they are also deemed to be less educated (Fuentes *et al.*, 2012). Such prejudices against, and stigmatisation of non-native English accents and more marked regional or social accents at the workplace are not uncommon as demonstrated in several studies (e.g. Deprez-Sims and Morris, 2010; Harrison, 2013). Khojastehrad *et al.* (2015) show that attitudinal prejudices and stereotypes exist when judging speakers of ethnolects. For instance, some ethnolects are found to leave a negative impression including unintelligibility, unpleasantness and incompetence (see Crystal, 2018). This is despite the fact that the diversity of English around the globe means that it is inevitable that English today is spoken in a variety of accents, and hence, there is no global standard accent of English (Trudgill, 1999).

A different employer pointed out that using the colloquial variety of English, for example, discourse particles such as “can ma” or “ok lah” are not appropriate in job interviews. In contrast, about 84 per cent of the students agreed that speaking the colloquial variety of English is acceptable in job interviews. One part of the questionnaire was also dedicated towards uncovering the students' opinions, and their expectations of the way their ethnically marked pronunciation might affect the way they are evaluated during job interviews. About 75 per cent of the students surveyed agreed that ethnic-based variation of pronunciation influence job opportunities, and an estimated 66 per cent of them felt that if they spoke with a marked regional accent, the chances of them being accepted by an organisation are reduced.

The acceptance of the aspects of English varieties in Malaysia can be graphically visualised in Figure 1. This separation between using a more standard form of English at the workplace is something worth looking into when preparing graduates for the workplace. The colloquial variety of English is widely used even by Malaysians who are fluent in the standard variety of English as it signals camaraderie, and there is not always such a strict separation between the use of the two varieties in many cases (Pillai, 2008). For instance, students in Singapore indicated a more diglossic use of English, using a more standard form in certain contexts and with certain people, whereas this was not the case for Malaysian students (Pillai, 2008). Thus, the colloquial variety of English may be heard between a lecturer and a student or between colleagues at a meeting. In fact, speakers are also likely to code-mix and code-switch, which is a normal phenomenon among multilingual speakers. Perhaps, one of the reasons for the blurred use of the two varieties of spoken English is that Malay is used in more formal spoken contexts in the public sector. Graduates may, therefore, find it hard to shift out of more informal use of English into a more standard spoken form during job interviews or at the workplace. This could even be true of written contexts, like work-related e-mails and text messages. Even if they were proficient and

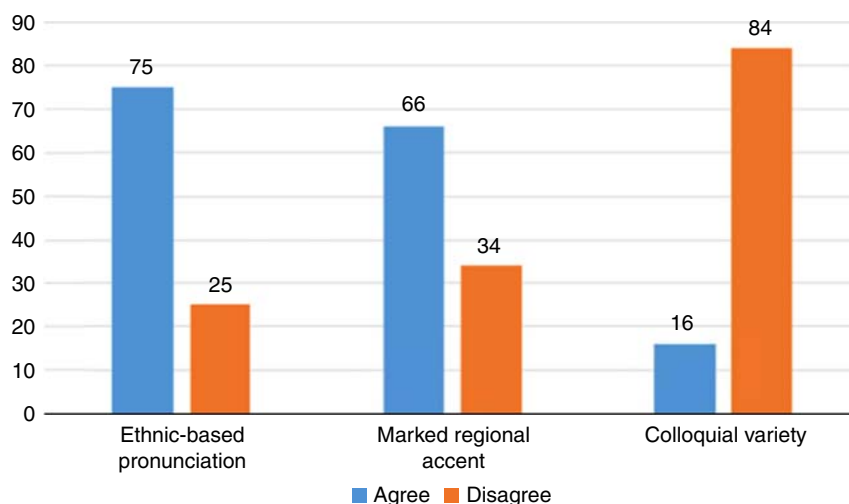


Figure 1.
Use of different
varieties of English
influence job
opportunities
according to student
respondents

fluent in English, their speaking and writing style may not be considered as appropriate for all contexts at the workplace. Hence, awareness of the contextually appropriate use of standard and colloquial English, and for that matter other languages, is perhaps something that needs to be included in the English language syllabus. In doing so, we move away from dismissing local varieties of English as being deficient (see Pillai and Ong, 2018).

Soft skills requirement

The interviews with employers found that there are other communicative attributes that are deemed important for employability which were not highlighted by the students. In addition to these, the employers also mentioned other skills.

Other language requirements. Given Malaysia's multilingual context, it is not surprising that employers also expect hires to be proficient in other local languages. For example, the national language, Malay, is also given importance as an entry requirement for some local companies. The staff from the news agency explained that since journalists need to be able to go into the field to cover stories and be able to write them in both English and Malay, applicants should be proficient in both English and Malay. In addition, journalists should be able to professionally translate Malay to English for news reports.

It was also found that increasingly more local employers are seeking applicants who have a fair command of Mandarin. These companies usually have a lot of dealings with customers from a Chinese-speaking background. In order to create a stronger rapport with their customers, these companies prefer to hire candidates who have the ability to speak Mandarin. Mandarin, in fact, is now offered as an additional language in selected residential and religious schools as part of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2015 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017), which provides for the implementation of foreign language programmes. Other languages taught in selected schools are Arabic, French, German, Japanese and Korean.

Graduates' level of confidence. The human resource officers who were interviewed said that they would prefer to employ graduates who exude confidence, for instance, candidates who can express themselves during a job interview. They were of the opinion that potential hires should not only depend on the qualifications they have stated in their curriculum vitae. Instead, they have to impress the panel of interviewers. As one of the

employers emphasised, first impressions and the manner in which applicants converse are determining factors of their fit for potential employment.

In sales and marketing firms, employees need to be able to influence, negotiate with and persuade their clients. In order to appear convincing, employees are expected to be confident of what they are conveying to their clients. Moreover, they should exhibit confidence while speaking to foreigners at international forums. One of the employers from a multinational electronics corporation stated that if candidates are too shy to speak up during a job interview, their chances of gaining employment in the corporation decreases compared to someone who speaks confidently. He revealed that:

Job skills can be trained. But again, the personality, the confidence level – that one takes many years to change, but you are very shy, you don't speak English. Then, maybe in our environment, you are not suitable.

Attitude and general knowledge. In a survey by Jobstreet.com (2015), one of the contributing factors of unemployment was revealed to be poor attitude. An employer from a news agency stated that positive attitude is highly valued and is one of their employee selection criteria. Applicants who display a favourable outlook are deemed more suitable for the job, and consequently, they have a greater prospect of being hired. Employers believe that having a positive attitude is important as it affects the overall work environment as well as the relationship between colleagues.

Another human resource manager stated that the lack of general knowledge serve as a disadvantage as well. An example about the colour code of the Malaysian identity card was given. Job applicants are usually required to fill in a form. One of the items solicits information on the colour of the applicant's identity card. Without knowledge of the meaning of the colour codes (e.g. blue for citizens, red for permanent residents, etc.), an applicant actually wrote "colourful". Uninformed graduates are more likely to be unsuccessful in proceeding further in the recruitment process.

Discussion

Based on the findings, it can be seen that both employers and graduates concur that English plays a major role in employability. Most employers use English as a gatekeeping tool. Those who are not able to use English to communicate orally, for example, to speak fluently during job interviews, to speak to clients or to conduct presentations may lose out on job opportunities. However, given that the industry is not a homogenous entity, the levels of accuracy and the productive language skills (e.g. speaking and writing) required by organisations differ depending on the types of job and the industry. Thus, some employers require graduates who have a higher level of ELP. In general, the notion of proficiency appears to be related to accuracy (Polio and Shea, 2014) of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar although in reality, being proficient in a language can be seen to encompass other dimensions of language use (Cummins, 1980, Mahboob, 2018).

With reference to speaking, "(f)luency in the narrow sense is usually described in terms of speedy and smooth delivery of speech without (filled) pauses, repetitions, and repairs" (De Jong *et al.*, 2015, p. 224). Some organisations favour applicants who are fluent in English. Other organisations, conversely, may only demand that candidates have a working knowledge of the language for communication purposes. According to the results derived from the responses to the questionnaire, Malaysian university students are aware that they must possess at the very minimum basic English language skills in order to enter the workforce. Thus, both accuracy and fluency are important.

There is also an indication that graduates must be able to use the more standard form of English at the workplace and should be aware of the negative perceptions

against marked accents. Being a multilingual country, it is not surprising that fluency in the national language and another language, like Mandarin, can be an asset for graduates. The findings also point out that other factors, such as confidence, and what is considered as a positive attitude are also traits that employers look for.

There are similarities in the perceptions of students and the expectations of employers in several aspects. These include the importance of English in employment, graduates' basic knowledge of English and speaking and writing in English as the two most important language skills to have (although the focus on either one is industry-dependent). Nevertheless, as shown in Table IV, there are areas considered important by employers which do not match the perceptions of students. Whist students indicated that a need for knowledge of different genres of texts is important, as previously mentioned, employers felt that this could be developed over time. Another area of mismatch is the use of the colloquial variety of English which the students thought was acceptable to use at the workplace but the employers did not. The employers also pointed out other skills that were necessary for graduates to possess, such as fluency in other languages apart from English, confidence, a positive attitude and general knowledge.

The main issue for employers is still English. As mentioned in Pillai *et al.* (2012), the fact that English is constantly cited as one of the main reasons for graduate unemployability is a worrying trend given that Malaysians have almost 11 years of English language education at the school level. Furthermore, Malaysian undergraduates at public universities usually have to attend compulsory English classes. Yet, graduates from these institutions are perceived to have a lower level of English proficiency compared to those from private institutions, and/or those who have graduated from universities abroad. This, in turn, results in the former being unable to secure jobs commensurate with their qualifications, leading to higher unemployment rates among graduates from public universities. This is why the Malaysian Government is taking the issue of English language education seriously as expressed in the Malaysia Education Blueprint at the school level. Many resources have been put into enhancing the quality

Main themes	Issues	Match between employers expectations and student respondents' perceptions
English and employability	Ability to communicate in English is important in landing a job	✓
English language proficiency skills	Speaking and writing are important	✓
	Fluency and accuracy in speaking and writing is important	✓
	The nature of the organisation influences the language skills needed	✓
	Writing assessment as part of employment selection	✓
	Have genre knowledge (knowledge of different types of spoken/written discourse types) as part of employment selection	X
Basic knowledge of English	Adequate range of vocabulary and basic grammar are essential	✓
Use of variety of English	Marked Malaysian accent may influence hiring decisions	✓
	Malaysian colloquial variety of English is unacceptable	X
Other skills	Ability to speak other languages apart from English	✓
	Level of confidence	X
	Positive attitude	X
	General knowledge	X

Notes: ✓ = match X = mismatch

Table IV.
English language and other skills: a comparison of the perceptions of student respondents and expectations of employers

and proficiency of English language teachers both through pre-service and in-service teacher training and upskilling programmes with the goal of improving the proficiency levels of Malaysian students. One of the major initiatives that are currently being put in place is the English Language Roadmap, which aims to align the English language curricula at all levels of education (preschool to tertiary level) to international standards. The Roadmap outlines measures to be taken to work towards producing graduates who are employable in the global context, and for this, a CEFR Level B2/C1 has been set as the target for graduates to achieve for English language by the year 2025 (English Language Standards and Quality Council, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015, p. 26).

The Roadmap presents action to be taken at all stages of education in order to work towards achieving the target CEFR levels for each stage by 2025. Given the strong support for the Roadmap from the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, we can expect to see an increased level of ELP among graduates by 2025. Some public universities, for example, have already begun to align their English language courses and assessments to CEFR bands. Public universities have also begun to increase the use of English beyond the English language classroom through activities like drama, public speaking, peer teaching and a variety of projects. This complements English language use that is already part of the students' academic programme, where English might already be the medium of instruction. For degree programmes that do not have English as a medium of instruction, these out-of-class programmes create opportunities for students to use the language beyond their English classes, helping to raise their confidence levels to use English. As evidenced at the recent Ministry of Higher Education English Carnival 2017, public universities are already carrying out programmes to enhance the English language skills of their students. The actual impact of the Roadmap can only be ascertained when at least one cohort of students has reached tertiary level, which is in about 13 to 14 years' time (from Primary 1 in 2018 to first year of university).

However, we have to bear in mind that the language situation in Malaysia is rather complex. Feedback from private business and the industry stresses the need for good English proficiency for them to hire Malaysian graduates, and for Malaysia to be competitive in the international trade and industry. Despite that, attempts by the government to strengthen English language education are often met with resistance from, for example, Malay NGOs and Chinese educationists. There is fear among such groups that such actions will threaten the use and status of the national language and Mandarin. This often results in programmes being shelved (e.g. the compulsory passing grade in English at the fifth form public exam) or halted altogether (e.g. the Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English Programme from 2003 to 2012 which reverted to being taught in Malay in national schools, and Tamil and Mandarin in vernacular schools). The current dual language programme, which allows the use of English or Malay for the teaching of Science, Mathematics, Information Technology and Communication, and Design and Technology, is also facing opposition from some Malay, Chinese and Tamil groups.

One consequence of such changes in policies is the increase in the number of Malaysians who study in private and international schools and subsequently enrol in private universities abroad for their tertiary education. For example, an estimated 64 per cent of students in international schools (estimated total = 61,156) are Malaysians (Nasa and Pilay, 2017). This is potentially creating an English-language elite among Malaysians who graduate from private and international institutions of learning. In relation to GE, these English-language elite groups would have an advantage in securing employment especially in multinational companies, and this will, in the long run, create a larger gap between students from the international and public schools. The proliferation of international schools also means an increasing number of Malaysians who are likely to not be proficient in the national language, and who are unfamiliar with Malaysian history. This goes against the

spirit of fostering national unity through a common school curriculum. Ironically, having English-medium schools and different curricula takes us back to the early independence period. We will not venture to discuss the implications of having different school systems and media of instruction as this is beyond the purview of this paper.

Conclusion

Based on the responses from both the students and employers, it is without doubt that English is a crucial factor in making graduates more employable. In response to internationalisation and the use of English as the global language, local and multinational companies in Malaysia tend to take on graduates who are proficient and fluent in English apart from possessing the necessary personal attributes. The mismatches between the perceptions of university students and the expectations of employers should be considered when planning both English language courses and degree programmes at universities. Among them are the need to be able to use a more standard form of English at the workplace. Malaysian students need to be able to switch between the standard and more colloquial variety of English depending on the speaking context. Employers also highlighted the need for multilingual skills and for graduates be confident and to have a good attitude.

Malaysian university students should be made aware of the different language and other employability skills sought by employers early in their university education, so that they can make use of the many opportunities provided by universities to increase their chances of being employed upon graduation. Universities need to continue to prepare students for the workplace through the English language classes that they conduct, and out of the classroom programmes and support systems they provide. More structured feedback from industry on both would help to better prepare students for the world of work and ease the transition from campus to career.

However, more needs to be done at the school level to provide students with opportunities to learn English so that by the time they enter higher education, they have the minimum proficiency required to cope with their academic subjects. Based on the Malaysian Education Roadmap (English Language Standards and Quality Council, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015), as discussed earlier in this paper, the target for English at the end of secondary education is CEFR B1/B2.

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