

# English Language Literacy: Juxtaposing Undergraduate Students' Competencies with Workplace Requirements

Wahiza Wah<sup>i\*</sup>

*Centre for General Studies, The National University of Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi,  
Selangor, Malaysia*

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## Abstract

Despite various measures executed by the Malaysian government, graduates unemployment remains a national issue given the escalating number of local graduates with low level of competence in English produced by Malaysian higher education institutions every year. In the provision of graduates for the challenging workforce, prospective employers' expectations of future recruits should be explored and taken into account to enhance the quality of teaching and training at these institutions. This paper presents a proportion of a larger study which aimed at (i) exploring undergraduate students' English language literacy practices and competencies and (ii) juxtaposing their competencies with prospective employers' expectations. Employing a qualitative case study approach, this paper draws on data gathered from in-depth interviews with the students and employers and supplemented by a small-scale survey. Key findings centre on issues of the students' technical difficulties in English and the discrepancy between their existing competencies and prerequisites set by the employers. The research findings contribute new dimensions and knowledge to understanding university students' predicaments at the intersection of English language competencies, tertiary education and the preparation for employment. These outcomes are predominantly beneficial for informing policy makers' agendas in producing competent graduates for future local and global workforce.

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*Keywords:* English language literacy; Language competencies; Graduate employability; Workplace literacy

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of rapid expansion of science and technologies and the strong forces of globalisation, the education industry has undergone gradual reformation to suit current expectations of the labour market. In Malaysia, educating people as human resources has become the integral element in realising the government's vision, enshrined in the policy Vision 2020, of achieving status as a developed and industrialised nation. Being a young and fast developing country, Malaysia faces numerous demands in fulfilling her society's need for a highly trained workforce within today's knowledge-based economy, which emphasises the importance of knowledge-based education and human capital development (Mustapha & Abdullah, 2004). Essentially, higher education institutions are the most crucial entities responsible for the creation and dissemination of knowledge whilst being the centre of science, scholarship and the new knowledge economies (Altbach, 2007). Added to these responsibilities are tremendous expectations on higher education institutions to produce highly skilled and knowledgeable

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6011-576-9373; Fax: +603-8925-2976.  
E-mail address: [wahizawahi@gmail.com](mailto:wahizawahi@gmail.com) [Wahi, W.].

graduates with communicative, creative and critical abilities to meet the demands of current employment scenarios.

Integral to these expectations is the extensive use of the English language as a global language and the main medium of communication in the professional settings. Hence, literacy in the English language is an imperative ingredient cultivated in the higher education agenda to educate and produce young Malaysians as potential human resources to fulfil the needs of the local and international workforce.

The impetus for the present study is the alarming fact concerning the deficiencies in English experienced by a substantial number of Malaysian university students despite the dominant role of English as the leading language of academic publications, communication and technologies at tertiary institutions. Several studies have revealed that most local university students have poor command of English and that they are not able to perform efficiently at the universities (Koo, Pang & Mansur, 2008; Muhammad, 2007; Yaacob, Azman, Abd Razak, Abd Aziz, & Wong, 2005; Yunus, 2007). Concurrently, studies have also reported that most employers are generally discontented with local graduates' levels of English, limited general knowledge and poor demonstration of communicative skills (Abdul Razak, Azman, Abd Aziz, Wong & Yaacob, 2006; Koo et al., 2008; Yunus, 2007; Zulkefli, 2007). The National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 illustrates graduates' poor command of English as the leading complication faced by employers in hiring fresh graduates in Malaysia (The Star, 2014).

The present study focuses on a close analysis of students' perspectives on their English language academic literacy practices and competencies upon completion of the compulsory English courses at a public university. Academic literacy or 'tertiary literacy' (Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode & Kocatepe, 2004) in higher education is simply defined as "the ability to read and write the various texts assigned in [university]" (Spack, 1997, p. 3). Fundamental to the term of English language literacy, this study sought to examine the multiple literacies (Gee, 1996) that incorporate reading, writing, listening and speaking practices in English occurring within the social and cultural contexts of the tertiary institution.

The main emphasis of this study was to investigate the problems concerning undergraduate students' deficiency in the English language, specifically focusing on their academic literacy practices and competencies upon completing their English language courses at the university. Additionally, the students' level of practices and competencies was compared with the current expectations of prospective employers. This was done to gauge whether there is a match or disconnection between the students' and the employers' point of view. Nevertheless, this paper specifically presents the summary of findings of the students' English language academic literacy practices and competencies while its main focus is to report the findings pertaining to employers' perspectives and expectations on the English language abilities of prospective recruits. Subsequently, this paper discusses the overall findings particularly juxtaposing the students' competencies in English with that of prospective employers' expectations. In essence, this paper adds an important dimension to the study of English language literacies in Malaysia by drawing in attention to the undergraduate students' English language academic literacies in their quest to meet the requirements of potential employment.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study is framed by an understanding guided by the New Literacies Studies that sees literacy in terms of social practices and typically embedded in social and cultural contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Heath & Street, 2008; Street, 1995). In this study, the practices of literacy and ways of understanding literate acts are perceived as dependent on the social institutions in which they are acquired and used. This broad perspective, conceived as the 'ideological' approach, takes into consideration the 'multiplicity' of literacies and their ideological nature existing within a particular society (Street, 1984). Consistent with the conceptions of literacy and the sociocultural approach to learning foregrounded by the present study are the complex issues of languages and challenges faced by the students, who are non-native speakers of English (NNSE), in their process of acquiring English in an academic situation that exposes them to various kinds of expectations while accommodating to the

linguistically diverse discourses and settings. This conceptual framework also encapsulates high level of academic literacies that include reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in English at the advanced tertiary level.

A search of the literature has established that no such study has been carried out worldwide on English language academic literacy practices and competencies for employability in an English-as-a-second-language context; neither has there been a study on unemployment associated with English language incompetency among university graduates. Generally, most studies abroad have deliberately dealt with the language, literacy and numeracy needs of the labour force among immigrants or non-native speakers of English in developed countries like Canada (Bell, 2000; Duff, Wong, & Early, 2002; Malicky & Norman, 1994), the United States (Hacker & Yankwitt, 1997) and Australia (Millar, 2001). The findings of these studies generally call for increased contextualized, interpretive and critical qualitative studies to examine the experiences, barriers, outcomes and personal transformations associated with language and literacy education (Duff et al., 2002).

In Malaysia, the high incidence of unemployment in recent years among local graduates due to their low level of competencies in English together with the changing demands of higher education as a consequence of globalisation have prompted considerable research surrounding the unemployment issues as its central focus (Ministry of Higher Education, 2006; Wok, Abdul Rahman, Abdul Majid, Mohd Noor, Zubairi & Mohd Yusof, 2007). Accordingly, many comments and views have been expounded suggesting the need to bridge the gap or mismatch between the available supply of manpower and the expectations of the potential employers (Abdul Kareem & Othman, 2007; Habib, 2007; Yunus, 2007). The fact that English language determines employability has often been confirmed and discussed in these studies. According to Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002), ensuring that their graduates can function in English in the workplace is a major issue in many developing countries.

A review of literature also has denoted that various studies conducted in Malaysia have dealt with employers' expectations of potential employees given the need to communicate intelligibly on the international scene. The focus has moved from studying the exploitation of English in social and informal workplace contexts to the use of English in formal situations in the workplace (Gill, 2002). Three studies are particularly relevant to this particular study due to their primary focus on identifying the English language competencies required by the workplace in the Malaysian context. Yaacob et al. (2005) interviewed four executives from Malaysian international and government link companies (GLC) through focus group interviews to identify proficiency and competencies of English highly valued in these corporations. The participants rated high competencies in English as the main criteria anticipated from job applicants because English is widely used in these corporations for different purposes in communication, interaction and business transactions. The ability to speak and write in English effectively is the utmost important skill valued by the employers in this study.

Similarly, Abdul Razak et al. (2006) requested a number of employers from different corporations to rank the importance of the four English language skills; reading, writing, speaking and listening. More than half of the employers affirmed that the ability to write in English is important. There is a higher expectation among employers of the graduates' ability to speak, listen and read in English. The overall findings show that all four language skills are considered as important or very important skills required by the prospective employers.

Another study related to the English language needs analysis in terms the four skills and grammar in the workplace is the one conducted by Talif and Noor (2009). The study, which sought to identify the relevance of the tertiary English language proficiency curriculum to the workplace, involved 86 final year students from various disciplines in four public universities in Malaysia. The students were interviewed upon completing their industrial training to investigate whether they were adequately prepared by their respective universities to use English in their working environment during industrial training.

In essence, the review of related literature above gives an indication that there is a need for more in-depth studies that provide close up examination on students' complex endeavours with the English language which impedes employable quality. This study fills the gap in the literature by providing qualitative insights on students' competencies and literacy practices in English to distinguish the divergence or convergence of these competencies and practices with regards to employers' requirements.

It seeks to find answers to the problem by examining the problem itself.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative approach to inquiry couched within the interpretive paradigm for data collection and data analysis. Informed by this interpretive orientation, the study obtained direct access to the researched participants and their specific contexts to understand how they construct and interpret meanings of their lived experiences.

### **3.1 Participants**

The primary participants of this study were 21 third-year undergraduate students from the Engineering faculty in a Malaysian public university. As key informants, the students were deliberately selected based on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) in which all of them had attained Band 2, the lowest level scored among the Engineering students.

This study was also informed by input gathered from several employers to provide information on English language literacies and competencies at their workplace as well as their expectations on new graduates. Thirteen Human Resource managers and/or executives representing various organisations in Malaysia were chosen. Most of the researched participants worked with multinational and local companies engaging with industrial and service sectors. The selection of the managers and executives was made based on their familiarity with recruitment of employees and their experience in recruiting new graduates from Malaysian public universities. It is important to highlight that for confidentiality purposes, the employers are identified by the alphanumeric codes (E1 to E13) in this paper.

### **3.2 Instruments**

Students' data were gathered by means of focus group interviews and supplemented by individual interviews and non-participant classroom observations. Added to these were the written summary sheets fulfilled by the students. Data gained from the employers were collated through in-depth interviews and supplemented by a qualitative questionnaire which was adapted with permission from the survey developed by Abdul Razak et al. (2007).

### **3.3 Procedures**

Given its main objective of exploring undergraduate students' academic literacy practices and competencies, this study utilised focus group interview as a means of eliciting the students' perspectives and experiences in a natural or real-life atmosphere, that is, in the academic environment. The interviews were deliberately carried out in a form of informal and casual group interactions in which the students share their perspectives and experiences using their own vocabulary and language. The interviews were largely conducted in the Malay language in combination with some simple English words and phrases which were commonly used by the students. Four cohorts were interviewed and each cohort comprised of five to seven students to allow for equal opportunity for each student to share his/her point of view. At the end of each focus group interview, the students were asked to fill in a written summary to record their private comments (Kitzinger, 1995) as some students might express themselves better through writing. It was also meant for the recording of other thoughts that might not occur during the interviews.

Individual interviews were conducted with six students who were recruited following the completion of the focus group interviews to further investigate the data and insight into students' English language literacy practices and competencies. The students were identified based on their potential for providing and elaborating on their personal academic literacy practices and experiences (Esterberg, 2002).

The non-participant observation was intended to witness and identify the researched students' English language academic literacy practices and competencies as they occurred in their natural settings,

namely the classrooms. In particular, the prime aim of the observation was the communicative activities performed by the students in their English classes as these were not attainable in the interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

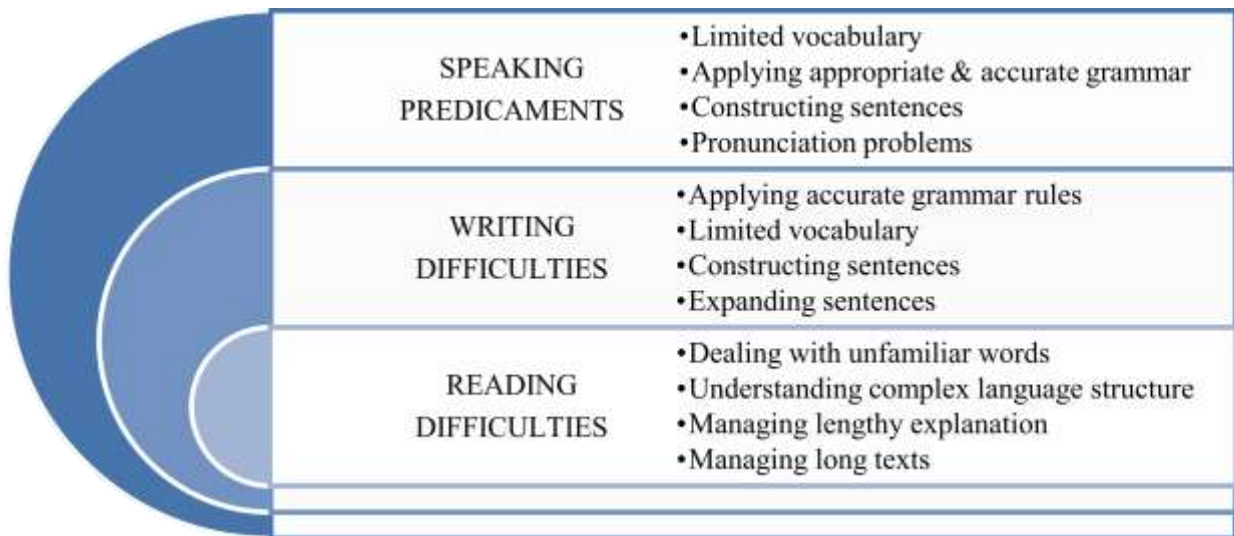
To develop understandings of prospective employers' perspectives and expectations on graduates' English language competencies, in-depth interviews were carried out with the selected managers and executives. A questionnaire was given to each employer after the interview to gather identifiable data pertaining to employers' corporate expectations on English language competencies and workplace literacies.

In the tradition of qualitative research, all data were read reiteratively and analysed rigorously through an inductive process of identifying the recurring and salient themes.

## FINDINGS

### 4.1 Students' English Language Academic Literacy Practices and Competencies

To reiterate, this study sought to find out (1) the extent of the researched students' English language academic literacy practices and competencies upon completing their English language courses and (2) the extent to which these competencies match with the expectations of prospective employers. In general, the findings of the first part of this study point to the students' perceived shortfalls with regard to linguistic and communicative competence as well as self-confidence as a consequence of their deficiency in English. Specifically, the findings indicate that the students' encounter various difficulties in terms of speaking, writing and reading except for listening. The summary of these findings is illustrated in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1.** Students' English language academic literacy practices and competencies

### 4.2 Employers' Expectations of Prospective Recruits

Central to the findings of the employers' expectations of prospective recruits is English language competence as the salient quality sought after. There is a prevailing view among the employers that communicative competence is the most crucial ability demanded of prospective employees given the central exploitation of English in the workplace daily practices. This is highlighted in the findings with regards to the employers' ranking of speaking abilities as the most important skills valued at the

workplace ahead of listening, reading and writing as presented in the following table. In particular, Table 1 illustrates the findings of the importance of four English language competencies - reading, listening, writing and speaking abilities - and language accuracy or grammar, expected from new recruits in the employers' respective organisations.

**Table 1:** The importance of the English language competencies perceived by employers.

Abilities	Very important	Important	Not important	Not very important
Ability to speak in English	61.5	38.5	0	0
Ability to listen in English	53.8	46.2	0	0
Ability to read in English	46.2	53.8	0	0
Ability to write in English	38.5	53.8	7.7	0
Language accuracy	23.1	69.2	7.7	0

In essence, the results signify that most employers regarded the ability to speak in English in the workplace as pivotal. Hence, this brings to the implications that communicative skill is the most crucial ability demanded of prospective employees. Although listening and reading abilities have lower percentages than speaking ability in the 'Very important' rating, all three competencies achieve 100% across 'Very important' and 'Important' ratings. This denotes that these competencies are essentially required of the new job applicants. Writing ability is also considered necessary as 92.3% rated the skill as 'Important' and 'Very important'. On the other hand, language accuracy is ranked marginally lower than the other abilities, albeit 92.3% rated it as 'Important' or more highly.

### 4.3 English Language Workplace Literacy

The following sub-sections provide further descriptions of the values of English language competencies from the employers' stance. In particular, these sub-sections present and discuss several situations in which the English language competencies are particularly exercised in various occupational domains. Each sub-section reports on five situations which are identified as salient by the researched professionals.

#### 4.3.1 Speaking Practices

**Table 2:** Situations where speaking skills in English language are most required.

Speaking	Very Important	Important	Not important	Not very important
Giving presentation	76.9	23.1	0	0
Communicating with foreign partners	69.2	30.8	0	0
Negotiating business matters	61.5	38.5	0	0
Working together with foreign counterparts on the same project	61.5	23.1	7.7	7.7
Reporting	46.2	46.2	7.6	0

The findings exhibited in Table 2 clearly depict a high demand on prospective personnel to be able to deliver oral presentations in the workplace settings. It is apparent that employers typically perceived

the ability to conduct oral presentations, particularly in presenting proposals in meetings ahead of internal and external counterparts, as crucial. Most employers agreed that a considerable amount of executive level tasks constituted performing oral presentations exclusively in English in various situations including monthly department meetings, proposal presentations, and briefings for the subordinates as well as “small group activity” (E9) or group discussions.

Taking into account that most business dealings and negotiations entail communicating and consulting other local and international companies, it is obligatory for new recruits to possess the ability to converse fluently in English to enable them to perform their responsibilities effectively. This is articulated by E1; “If they don’t possess good communication skills, it will be hard to communicate with others. As a result, some areas of work might be affected.” Furthermore, most corporations also denoted reporting skill as one of the obligations of future employees. It is essentially useful especially in some cases which require the executives to report “the activities that have been done to the bosses” (E1) or “the budget and appraisals in the meetings” (E12).

The findings also draw attention to the employers’ shared view that communicative ability, particularly in English, is one of the most important criteria in selecting prospective employees. Although it was not ranked as the leading criterion in the selection of job applicants, it is unanimously accredited as the central quality sought after. Indeed, E2 strongly emphasised that “English competency is paramount.” Sharing this perspective, E9 enunciated that “English is very important for executive staff”. These findings suggest that in order for new recruits to be employed by the organisations, it is crucial for them to portray an acceptable level of fluency in English during the job interview as it is the only platform for employers to gauge the new recruits’ communicative competence. In addition, E7 asserted that English is highly essential in the workplace, so much so that the employees who are competent in English are normally privileged by their organisations.

#### 4.3.2 Listening Practices

**Table 3:** Situations where listening skills in English language are most required.

Listening	Very Important	Important	Not important	Not very important
Understanding meetings and negotiation	61.5	38.5	0	0
Understanding others at seminars, conferences, briefings, presentations, etc	53.8	46.2	0	0
Understanding information from various media	46.2	53.8	0	0
Receiving instructions	46.2	46.2	0	7.6
Receiving orders	38.5	53.8	0	7.7

Inevitably, speaking and listening practices are closely interrelated as they are both mandatory for successful communication to take place. Table 3 exhibits several situations in which listening practices are generally indispensable. Considering the fact that a large portion of the executives’ responsibilities entail face-to-face interactions and mass media communications, it is extremely essential for the potential recruits to be able to comprehend diverse workplace discourses emerging in various settings such as in the meetings, seminars, briefings and presentations. Concurrently, the ability to absorb massive information attained from various channels is also deemed vital. As most typical executives’ tasks necessitate constant communication with the superiors, it is implicit that the potential executives should be able to understand the directives or requests mandated to them. This would enable them to perform their daily tasks efficiently.

### 4.3.3 Reading Practices

**Table 4:** Situations where reading skills in English language are most required.

Reading	Very Important	Important	Not important	Not very important
Reading reports and agreements	53.8	46.2	0	0
Reading technical manuals	46.2	53.8	0	0
Reading technical descriptions	38.5	61.5	0	0
Reading formal letters	38.5	61.5	0	0
Reading written work instructions	38.5	53.8	0	7.7

Table 4 illustrates that there are a variety of reading resources that potential employees need to decipher in order to fulfil their job requirements. It is observed that the reading practices that most executives are expected to engage in constitute reading various reports, agreements, technical manuals and descriptions as well as business correspondences. Additionally, E2 commented that most executives have to conduct some readings prior to writing their proposals. In the same vein, E3 explained that reading is also necessary in the preparation of the executives' routine reports.

### 4.3.4 Writing Practices

**Table 5:** Situations where writing skills in English language are most required.

Writing	Very Important	Important	Not important	Not very important
Writing reports	53.8	30.8	7.7	7.7
Writing formal business letters	46.2	46.2	7.6	0
Writing standard operating procedures	46.2	38.4	7.7	7.7
Writing for the website/Internet	46.2	30.8	15.4	7.6
Writing brochures	46.2	30.8	15.4	7.6

The findings in Table 5 accentuate on the writing competencies frequently practiced by every member of the workforce. Germane to the prevailing writing skills stipulated by the majority of employers is the ability to write reports on completed work or work-related assessment required of most personnel of the organisations. Citing E3, "The job applicant must have a good writing skill because he needs to write reports every now and then"; this implies the vital needs on report writing competencies. Indeed, taking into account the significance of report writing skill, some corporations take the initiative to conduct writing tests prior to employing new recruits. This is affirmed by E13 that "Some companies have writing tests which include writing a report and an essay."

Furthermore, it was reported that there are varied conventions of report writing in most professional settings which are fundamentally subjected to the preferences of individual organisations. E13 further explained that "Sometimes certain departments have different ways of writing reports. Some prefer straight forward, some not. Their choices of words and style of writing are also different."

It is significant that the employers reached consensus on the importance of the different styles of report produced by the technical and non-technical staff in their respective companies. With regards to the manufacturing department, E9 revealed that a fixed-formatted report was generally exploited by the



engineers to state the details of their work. Such a report constituted a considerable amount of “data” (E1), “figures and tables with little explanation” (E9) as well as “technical terms” (E6). Contrastively, the reports produced by the administrative, marketing and sales staffs consist of extensive expressions and explanation in English. This is explicitly articulated by E13 in the ensuing excerpt:

*Engineers need to do report writing but it is more of technical reports which do not have impressive words. Their main interest is the technical terms; as long as the message reported is understandable, that is fine. Most engineering departments have their own template. There is less description, more straight forward sentences, and lots of key words written in bullet point. But in support departments like Human Resource and Finance, yes, and their English must be good.*

Besides writing the reports, other writing competencies that are comparatively sought after by most organisations incorporate composing business correspondences, job-related manuals and online documentations. To quote E10, “I think now the use of Microsoft technology makes their job easier...”; this implies that the convenience offered by the contemporary technology enhances the employees’ writing practices.

#### 4.3.5 Language Accuracy

To develop understandings of the predominant role of the English language in the occupational domains, it was necessary to delve into the employers’ expectations with regards to the precision of language use, particularly in terms of grammar usage among new recruits. Table 6 illustrates the findings on the value of language accuracy as perceived by the employers.

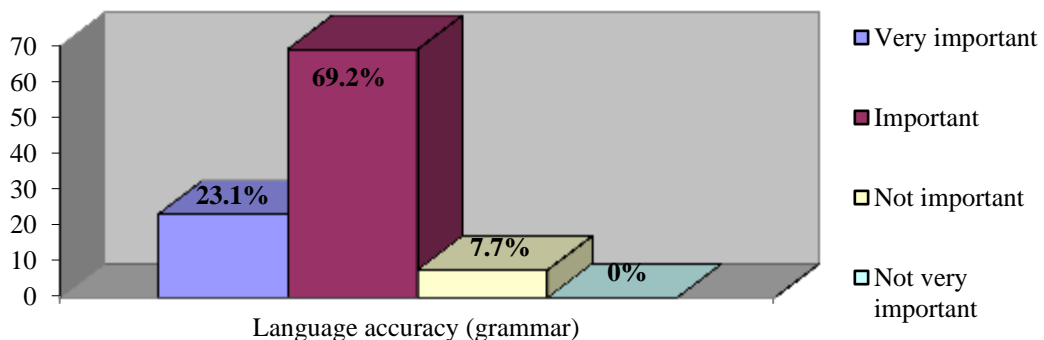


Figure 2. Language accuracy as perceived by employers

While just over one fifth of the employers considered language accuracy as very important for potential employees, the majority considered language accuracy as important and a small minority rated it as marginal. These findings suggest that accurate grammar is deemed as fairly essential. Indeed, there was a high degree of consensus among the employers that it is extremely crucial for job applicants to demonstrate their ability to converse and convey comprehensible messages effectively when attending job interviews. Thus, this draws less attention to the candidates’ language accuracy as the primary objective of most job interviews is to assess the potential candidates’ communicative competence. This is explicitly expressed by E4;

*Even though we ask in English, we do not expect them to answer with perfect English. We just want to gauge their performance and we are not concerned about their grammar use.*

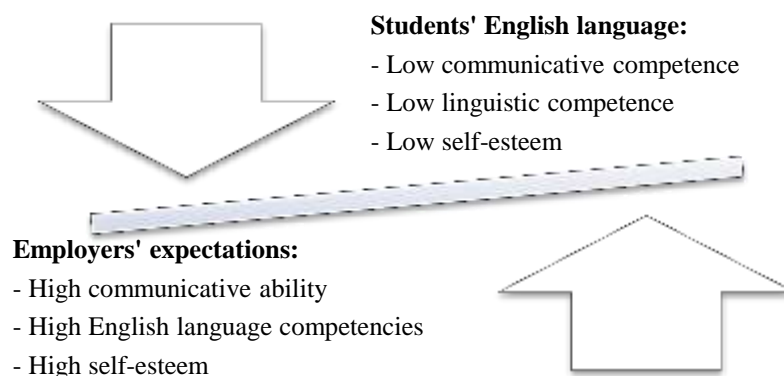
Nevertheless, it was made explicit that some multinational and international organisations operating

extensively in English placed significant emphasis on the accurate use of English grammar in their written documents and business correspondences as they “do not want [their] image to be jeopardised or tarnished by bad English usage” (E10). This is especially true in the case of the administrative, marketing and sales staff while it is minimally applicable to the technical staff. According to E9, “I think language accuracy is not that important for engineers because they only write reports and present them in the department meetings”; this signifies that much of the engineers’ daily tasks hardly involved direct personal contacts with their external counterparts. Hence, the precision of English grammar is somewhat marginalised.

## DISCUSSIONS

This paper clearly proves that the need for competency in English is paramount specifically in the job interview. Consistent with the findings of Abdul Razak et al. (2006), most employers in this study highlighted that it is imperative for potential recruits to exhibit acceptable communicative qualities and market themselves adequately during the job interview as these will determine their employment or otherwise. Certainly, the findings signify that there is a strong need for future recruits to enhance their communicative competencies and skills as these are significantly required by the employers. Nevertheless, this does not imply that other competencies are unimportant; rather the emphasis in communicative abilities is of primary concern.

More importantly, this paper demonstrates the discrepancies between the students’ overall English language competencies and the prospective employers’ expectations with regard to English language competencies. This is represented by the following diagram.



**Figure 3.** The interconnections between students’ English language competencies and prospective employers’ expectations

Clearly, a huge disparity between the students’ existing English literacy competencies with the prerequisites set by the employers is evidenced in the findings. It is poignant to note that the students’ current competencies in English are indeed far from reaching the employers’ expectations due to their major deficits constituting partial linguistic knowledge, communicative incompetence and low self-confidence. These deficiencies have resulted in a negative outlook on their existing English language competencies and impacted their overall academic performance. The major concern constantly raised by the students was their meager capability to express and articulate their ideas conveniently and comfortably in English. This could well limit their ability to promote themselves satisfactorily and meet the demands of prospective employment upon graduation.

While employers expect future recruits to reach the level where they can think in English, provide spontaneous responses particularly in the job interviews and communicate effectively and appropriately in the workplace, the students in this case disclosed that they lacked the language to get their message across owing to their restricted capability in the productive skills. It is evidenced that the students were

confronted with the inconveniences to respond to conversations in English as their thinking is normally carried out in their mother tongue language and, subsequently, they need to translate their utterances before they can even produce them in English. This implies the complexities they might encounter in the near future should they were required to respond spontaneously in their work routine. Affirming that linguistic proficiency in English is one of the essential attributes for students' employability, Kubler and Forbes (2004), in Koo et al. (2008) purport that it entails the abilities to use the language and to apply these abilities in appropriate contexts as well as presenting ideas convincingly and coherently in written and oral discourses while simultaneously complying with the generic conventions. However, these abilities appear to be lacking in the context of the students in this study. In addition, Koo et al. (2008) contend that the language proficiency of graduates could be viewed in terms of functional English for workplace environments which are different from academic milieu. This also points to the need to review the English language as functional lingua franca operating within the complex multicultural and multiracial context where English is literally not the mother tongue language.

Essentially, attending the job interview is likely to establish some kind of a threatening environment for the students due to their low self-confidence to converse in English. As firmly expressed by the students, they would be terrified to go through the job interviews since they are not confident to speak appropriate English, to pronounce and articulate their words properly and even to produce grammatically acceptable utterances. As a matter of fact, English language is largely perceived as their biggest barrier for employment. Indicating that they may have acquired and possessed some basic knowledge on the procedures to apply and prepare themselves for the job interviews as well as some training on conducting discussions and meeting from the English courses that they attended, this preparation however was conceived as insufficient as they still lack the competence and confidence to communicate in English. Therefore, in spite of knowing that their lack of competence will affect their employability, the students seem unable to improve. In essence, these findings suggest that the students' inadequate competency with regards to English language proficiency virtually guarantees that they will not have the capability and readiness to meet the demands of the workforce.

The students' current circumstances appear to substantiate and confirm the employers' overall belief that prospective employees possess limited competency in English. Additionally, the findings resonate with those of Sirat, Pandian, Muniandy, Sultan, Haroon and Azman (2008) and the remark made by the employers in the present study that most graduates are incapable to project their communicative abilities despite their excellent academic achievement due to lack of confidence and mastery of English. Towards this end, Aruna (2011) affirms that the poor level of English and lack of self-confidence are the main reasons for concern among Malaysia employers. Also, it is apparent that the students' deficits in English, as illustrated in the findings, coincide with the study by Sirat et al. (2008) on graduates' perspectives pertaining to their restricted interpersonal and interactive skills. According to the graduates in the study, the exposure to English in their tertiary environment was minimal; while their lecture notes were mostly printed in English, their lectures were presented in Malay. These brought about difficulties using English in the academic setting whenever they intended to do so.

Further, it is deemed problematical for the students in this study to apply for the positions in multinational and international organisations where daily routine necessitates English practices because of their scarce communicative competence and confidence. Indeed, the sheer exhaustion of operating at two levels of English language is predictable, given the daily conversational English that the students are expected to be able to engage with, alongside other Engineering discourses that they have to be able to perform in everyday discussion while attending to meetings and delivering oral presentations. Their informal communication in English and formal Engineering discourses that they are expected to manage if they are involved in such kinds of environments will impose an immense complexity and challenge to them. This is especially true considering the variations of English literacy expectations and practices occurring in diverse occupational contexts as shown in the findings.

## CONCLUSION

This paper gives the indication that the higher education institutions have to reconsider radically the

education and training needs of their undergraduate students. In fact, universities must understand the needs of their students, and provide courses that meet these needs. It is vital to provide additional and multiple English language opportunities and exposure in the university environment. In light of the current expectations of integrative skills and English language competencies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace, the university curriculum needs to be revised in order to address the needs of the contemporary workplace. Graduating students need to be trained sufficiently and to be given more opportunities in using English language in preparation for language needs for the workplace and the soft skills needed by the prospective employers. Failure to address these dimensions will lead to producing graduates with low quality, thus increasing the nations' burden of handling the issue of unemployment.

Furthermore, the universities should look at these findings seriously and come up with plans to improve their programmes and services, particularly with respect to the balance between theory and practice and to match educational contents to industrial needs and English language competencies. Furthermore, the university curriculum needs to be revised from time to time to establish and develop links between the universities and the industries. This is crucial as the workplace has always experienced unexpected changes pertaining to knowledge and technology. The universities must take cognisance of the need to constantly upgrade, improve and equip future graduates with the necessary employability skills needed in the workplace so that they will be well prepared and well competent to meet the demands of future local and global workforce.

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