

EMPLOYERS' VIEWS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND COMMUNICATION SKILL FOR EMPLOYABILITY IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Employability of graduates is a concern in many countries, including Malaysia, and the high unemployment rate among graduates is often attributed to their lack of English proficiency and communication skills. These two distinctive elements are often collated, and it is important to find out which is more important to employers. The study examined the employers' views on the importance of English proficiency and communication skill for graduates to be employed in the Malaysian private sector. The data were from semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 employers in the private sector who were in the position to recruit staff. The 21,433-word interview transcripts were analyzed. The results revealed that employers in the Malaysian private sector view language proficiency and communication skills as separate qualities. The employers are willing to consider employing candidates with average English proficiency if they have good communication skills, except for jobs which require more communication in English such as customer service and marketing. The results also revealed that good communication skills can increase employability and opportunities for career advancement. The findings highlight the communication skills that universities need to emphasize so that their graduates have the necessary skills to perform well in employment interviews and in their work.

Keywords: English proficiency; communication skill; graduate employability; Malaysia; private sector

Employability of graduates is a concern in many countries, and Malaysia is no exception as shown by a report by the Department of Statistics of Malaysia:

The unemployment rate in Malaysia was recorded at 3.2 percent in August of 2015, remaining steady from the preceding month and matching market forecasts. ... Unemployment rate in Malaysia averaged 3.26 percent from 1998 until 2015, reaching an all time high of 4.50 percent in March of 1999 and a record low of 2.70 percent in August of 2012. (Trading Economics, 2015)

Research has identified some reasons for the high unemployment rate in Malaysia, among which is unrealistic salary expectation. A JobStreet.com survey on graduate employment in Malaysia conducted in November 2011 involving 1,830 respondents revealed that graduates were asking for too high a salary (JobStreet, 2015). The bachelor degree holders expected a salary level between RM1,800 and RM2,600 for the bachelor's degree holders (73%) whereas the diploma holders expected a salary level between RM1,200 and RM1,800 (67%). In fact, 29% of the respondents had rejected a job offer because the salary and

benefits were below their expectation. The survey found that in reality only 54% of the bachelor's degree holders received the expected salary level of RM1,800 - RM2,600. Another 35% received a salary below RM1,800. The results also showed that diploma holders were more likely to be employed than degree holders. Based on their survey of human resource executives, Jayasingam, Fujiwara, and Thurasamy (2016) stated that highly competent candidates could afford to be choosy about their jobs and it might not have adverse effects on their employability.

However, the high unemployment rate among graduates is often attributed to their lack of English proficiency and communication skills. In the workplace context, good communication skills refer to the ability to transmit and receive information clearly, and include the ability to read the audience in order to avoid and resolve conflicts (Kermode, 2017). In Malaysia, feedback from stakeholders in the private sector, reported in the mass media (e.g., Aruna, 2011; Teoh, 2011), indicate that graduates do not have the necessary language and communication skills for workplace communication. Consequently, they cannot speak English properly or are not