

RETHINKING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE USE IN PROFESSIONAL SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT

In today's globalised and competitive job market, graduates must meet the rising industry expectations for effective real-world communication skills, alongside technical expertise. In the era where English proficiency often defines employability, employers increasingly prioritise graduates with strong language proficiency and effective communication skills as key indicators for employability. However, the specific communicative competencies required in professional settings is still not well-understood. Using Canale and Swain's (1980) framework, this study investigates the employers' perception of communicative competence perceived as important for effective communication in the workplace. Data were collected through a questionnaire analysed using descriptive statistics. Findings revealed that sociolinguistic competence was most valued as it emphasises the importance of contextually appropriate language use in workplace communication. This study highlights the significance of adopting established second language framework beyond academic contexts to better align language education with industry expectations hence offering an alternative language curriculum for educators and policymakers to enhance English language training and graduate employability.

Keywords: communicative competence; employers' perception; English language; graduate employability; language at workplace

Introduction

In today's increasingly competitive and globalised job market, new graduates face mounting challenges in meeting evolving employer demands as they seek to align with professional expectations. As English has gradually become the dominant language of globalisation and industrialisation, it has emerged as a key competency sought by employers. English proficiency and strong communication skills, alongside technical or job specific abilities, are now regarded as essential for effective workplace contribution (Matsuoka & Mihail, 2016). Research indicates that Malaysian employers prioritise graduates who can express themselves clearly in English, both orally and in writing, with language accuracy playing an important role in hiring decisions (Hamid et al., 2014; Zainuddin et al., 2019). Consequently, the ability to communicate effectively in English remains a critical factor in enhancing graduate employability in Malaysia. This growing demand has placed pressure on higher education institutions worldwide to ensure that graduates are equipped with competencies required for the modern workforce (Yorke, 2006). However, although various efforts have been made to strengthen undergraduates' English language competency for employment, these initiatives have primarily focused on improving general language skills.

Similarly, many studies conducted on employers' perspectives on graduates' language competence in the workplace have also mainly focused on general language skills rather than the specific communicative competencies required in the professional settings (Jawing & Kamlun, 2022; Ne'matullah et al., 2023; Rahman et al. 2019; Singh, 2021). For instance, Jawing and Kamlun (2022) examined how English proficiency affected the employability of Social Science graduates from a Malaysian public university, using data scores from 7,025 graduates on their employment status, English course results and MUET scores. Ong et al. (2022) investigated employability and communication skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and general workplace skills to ascertain the types of employability skills perceived as important for employment by students, lecturers and employers in Sarawak.

Drawing from previous research, Zainuddin et al. (2019) highlighted that terms such as "proficient" and "competent" in English as perceived by employers are also often used with no clear definitions. In this context, competence can also extend beyond language ability to include communicative skills such as presenting ideas effectively and confidently in both oral and written form, as well as practical abilities such as constructing clear sentences, giving instructions and asking questions. Given the overlapping meanings of what encompasses language proficiency and communicative competence in the workplace, it is important to examine the role of English in relation to employability, with particular emphasis on communicative competence skills, as it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how language skills enable individuals to navigate their professional interactions and achieve the organisational goals.

Building on this understanding, there is a crucial need to investigate how such competence can potentially be enhanced through established second language acquisition theories. One such framework is Hymes' (1972) concept of communicative competence, which emphasises the contextual and functional use of language beyond grammatical accuracy (Kanwit & Solon, 2022). While the theory is predominantly applied within the classroom-based SLA contexts, it holds untapped potential for informing pedagogical approaches that are aimed at equipping graduates with the necessary communicative competence for professional environments. Accordingly, it is critical to investigate how the communicative competence theory can be effectively leveraged to bridge the gap between academic language training and linguistic demands of workplace environments.

In line with this, the aim of this study was to identify the aspects of English language communicative competence that employers consider most important in professional settings.

Review of Literature

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence refers to individual's ability to use language effectively and appropriately in various social contexts. Beyond linguistic skills, it also involves the ability to understand and use sociocultural norms and pragmatic rules to achieve successful communication (Lillis, 2006). Originally developed by Hymes (1972), the theory identifies several key sub-competencies such as linguistic competence, encompassing knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and syntax; sociolinguistic competence, reflecting awareness of the social and cultural contexts in which language is used (Vorwerk, 2015); pragmatic competence, involving the use of appropriate language forms for specific communication purposes; as well as discourse competence, referring to the ability to construct coherent and cohesive texts and conversations (Walker et al., 2018). In other words, this theoretical perspective views language not merely as mastery of linguistic abilities alone, but also as a primary means of communication that integrates both cognitive and social abilities that enable individuals to interact meaningfully in diverse contexts.

Canale and Swain (1980) expanded on Hymes' (1972) concept of communicative competence by developing a more detailed and practical model widely applied in language teaching. The framework, which forms the basis of this study, identifies four main components:

- **Grammatical Competence:** Aligns with Chomsky's (1965) linguistic competence and involves knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology, and semantics to enable accurate sentence production and comprehension.
- **Sociolinguistic Competence:** Derives from Hymes' (1972) work, and involves understanding the social rules of language use, such as appropriateness, cultural norms and politeness in different contexts.

- **Strategic Competence:** Refers to the ability to use communication strategies to overcome difficulties or breakdowns in communication, such as paraphrasing, requesting clarifications, or using gestures.
- **Discourse Competence:** Involves the ability to construct, interpret and understand coherent texts and conversations, extending beyond individual sentences to larger units of language (Canale, 1983).

Building on this foundation, Celce-Murcia (2007) emphasises that discourse competence, or the ability to produce and comprehend extended texts and conversations with coherence and cohesion, is central for authentic real-world language use. Additionally, the framework also incorporates strategic competence, which focuses on using appropriate strategies to manage the communication challenges, overcome potential misunderstandings and maintain smooth and effective interaction. Subsequently, this adapted framework is considered more practical and highly relevant for real-world language use, as it equips learners with essential skills that go beyond grammatical accuracy to include purposeful, effective and context-sensitive communication (Celce-Murcia, 2007).

The term communicative competence has since been widely used within the context of language education or more broadly in the field of applied linguistics (Davies, 1989). It not only shifted the focus of language teaching to emphasise the importance of practical language use in real life situations (Wang et al., 2025) but also reshaped the understanding of language proficiency that encompasses both linguistic as well as cultural and social dimensions (Batziakas, 2016).

While the communicative competence framework has been predominantly explored in pedagogical and language learning contexts, research on how this concept is specifically perceived in professional settings may be limited. In particular, there is little understanding of graduates' language readiness for the workplace. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the key competencies most valued by employers in professional settings using Canale and Swain's (1980) framework. By applying a well-established framework in a workplace context, this research seeks to inform curriculum design and provide practical guidance for graduates and institutions on the communicative proficiency expected in the workplace.

Communicative Competence among Malaysian Graduates

Communicative competence studies among graduates in Malaysia have been extensive, encompassing a broad spectrum of research that examine pedagogical and learning strategies (Layagan, 2024; Radin & Ismail, 2025; Rahman et al., 2022) and highlighting the importance of English communication skills demanded by the workplace (Kamil & Anuar, 2022; Singh, 2021; Ting et al., 2017).

Previous research has highlighted a clear gap between the communication skills taught in tertiary-level English courses, and what the employers expect. Based on the need to align academic training with workplace expectations, Talif and Noor's (2009) study investigated the relevance of tertiary-level English language proficiency curricula to workplace communication demand. Data collected involving 86 final year students from four Malaysian public universities revealed that there exist inadequate

language skills offered in existing English language courses at tertiary level to meet the demand of workplace communication. Structured interview data also revealed that students continued to struggle with task-specific activities such as report writing, minute taking and professional oral communication.

Ting et al. (2017) examined employers' perceptions of English proficiency and communication skills in the workplace and found that both are key competencies that significantly contribute to graduates' employment readiness. The study also showed that employers were willing to hire candidates with only moderate language proficiency if they demonstrated strong communication skills. Semi-structured interview data from 10 private sector employers further revealed that effective communication skills strongly influenced employability and career advancement, underscoring the need for Malaysian universities to strengthen communication-focused and practical training in their curricula.

Another study examined the perspectives of Malaysian employers and students regarding English proficiency and workplace communication. Singh's (2021) study involved 68 interns undergoing their eight-week internship. Although the interns frequently engaged in workplace communication tasks such as emails, team discussions and telephone interactions, they reported difficulties in using English fluently and effectively in real-life situations. The findings highlighted the persistent issue that university training does not adequately equip students for real-world communication demands, revealing the urgent need for collaborative efforts by industry stakeholders to enhance the English language programmes and better reflect the evolving linguistic demands of the workplace.

The Study

The study employed a questionnaire to ascertain which aspects of English language communicative competence among university graduates are most valued by employers. Data were collected from 34 employers across various industries to evaluate their perceptions of different components of communicative competence, including sociolinguistic, strategic, discourse, and grammatical competence.

Participants

A total of 34 employers completed the questionnaire, out of the 41 who were invited to participate. These employers participated in the study based on their involvement with the university's internship program. During the data collection process, they were directly supervising the university's interns, which gave them firsthand insight into the English language competencies expected of graduates. They represented a variety of industries, including public and private sector companies in finance, healthcare, engineering, IT, retail as well as education.

Most participants held supervisory or managerial positions and were directly involved in human resource functions, such as interviewing job applicants and overseeing interns, which further informed their perspectives on workplace communication expectations. All participants had a minimum of five years of professional experience. They were purposively selected for their ability to provide

professionally grounded insights specifically on the use of English in professional communication.

Research Instrument

An online questionnaire comprising 21 items was developed to assess communicative competence across various social and workplace contexts. The questionnaire was based on Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING model which provided a comprehensive framework for analysing language use in specified contexts, such as social roles, settings, goals and cultural norms. The questionnaire underwent several rounds of revisions and was reviewed by two ESL experts to ensure its content validity. Participants rated each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (least important) to 5 (most important), allowing them to indicate the importance of different communicative behaviours from their perspective.

The questionnaire focused on four components of communicative competence consisting of sociolinguistic, strategic, discourse, and grammatical competence. Sociolinguistic competence highlights how graduates are expected to use English appropriately in workplace situations. Employers were asked about the importance of graduates' ability to adjust their communication style to suit different contexts, such as casual conversations with colleagues and formal meetings with clients. The questions also explored employers' expectations for graduates to select language that fits their communication purposes, for example, requesting information or clarifying instructions, reflecting the graduates' awareness of social and professional norms.

Grammatical competence focuses on language accuracy and appropriate use of grammatical forms across different communication contexts. In this case, employers were asked about the importance of graduates' ability to adapt grammatical structures based on audience and purpose, such as using formal grammar with clients or senior management and simple, clear language in emails and instructions. The questions also addressed how graduates are expected to use appropriate grammar to achieve communication goals, for instance, keeping language concise in emails or instructions, and more elaborate in reports and presentations.

Discourse competence examines how effectively messages are organised and conveyed in different workplace situations. In this section, employers were asked about the importance of graduates' ability to adjust their tone and style to suit different settings and audiences, and to use the language purposefully, such as in persuasion, or negotiation. The questions also considered the importance of graduates communicating clearly and appropriately across various platforms, while demonstrating awareness of workplace communication norms in different professional settings.

Strategic competence considers how individuals adapt communication strategies to manage challenges in professional interactions. In this section, the questionnaire focused on employers' expectations for graduates to adjust their communication in different workplace contexts. Employers were asked about the importance of graduates' ability to modify their language style and tone, adapt to different situations, whether formal or informal, and use clarification techniques to

prevent or resolve misunderstandings, helping them communicate clearly and effectively.

The questionnaire provided valuable insights in capturing the employers' perception of how language features are used across diverse workplace communication scenarios. In doing so, it offered a window into how language and context specifically shaped the communication practices in professional settings.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

Employers from a range of industries were purposively selected to provide a broad and diverse perspective on workplace communication. All participants took part voluntarily. They received detailed information about the study and provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire. Participants also had the opportunity to contact the researcher directly if they had questions or needed clarification regarding any aspect of the study. The questionnaire was distributed at the conclusion of the university internship program, and they were given a month to complete it.

Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to determine these employers' perceptions of the importance of different components of communicative competence for effective workplace communication. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for each component to identify the trends in employers' preference.

Results and Discussion

Based on the 34 employers' responses gathered, Table 1 revealed that sociolinguistic competence was the most preferred category ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.241$), in comparison to strategic competence ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.49$), discourse competence ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.58$). Grammatical competence was perceived as the least important ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.56$).

Table 1

Employers' Perceptions of Communicative Competence Components: Descriptive Statistics

Communicative Competence Component	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Sociolinguistic competence	$M = 3.77$	$SD = 0.241$
Strategic competence	$M = 3.61$	$SD = 0.49$
Discourse competence	$M = 3.58$	$SD = 0.58$
Grammatical competence	$M = 3.41$	$SD = 0.56$

In essence, sociolinguistic competence, which encompasses the ability to adjust language appropriately across numerous social settings or contexts in the workplace, was rated as the most critical communication skill for graduates at the early careers stage. Linguistic accuracy alone is perceived as insufficient for effective communication to take place. In other words, while understanding and producing correct utterances is valued, the ability to use language appropriately in different

social contexts is much preferred in professional settings. Hence, successful communication in the workplace using the English language is deemed achieved if the speaker can effectively interpret the social context and strategically adjust the linguistic choices in line with the communicative norms.

The strong preference for sociolinguistic competence over grammatical competence also reflects the practical reality of daily communication, which is often shaped by complex contextual and situational factors. Hence, mere knowledge of linguistic rules is not sufficient to achieve the effective communicative goals intended. Instead, competent communication should meet the appropriate social and cultural factors that exist in a given situation, such as tactfulness or politeness and the avoidance of violating social and interpersonal norms, rules, and expectations (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989).

The results indicate a greater emphasis on the functional aspects of communication. However, it is noteworthy to highlight that the results show only a slight difference between strategic competence ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.49$) and discourse competence ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.58$). This finding further supports employers' strong preference for the ability of the speaker to manage communication breakdowns, overcome communication difficulties and ensure cohesion in form as well as clarity in the meaning of the messages conveyed (Ali et al., 2025; Kamil & Anuar, 2022; Ong et al., 2022). It also indicates that employers value both competencies almost equally by recognising the importance of managing communication gaps while maintaining cohesion and clarity in interactions. Collectively, these findings reinforce the broader trend observed in the results which indicate a greater emphasis on functional aspects of communication, as reflected in sociolinguistic and strategic competence, over structural aspects of communication that is represented by discourse and grammatical competence.

The employers' preference for functional over structural dimensions of language further reiterates the findings of previous studies, highlighting the importance of communication as a key factor in organisational success, particularly in enhancing organisational performance and decision-making (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). Accordingly, it is natural for employers to value appropriateness and adaptability in workplace communication to achieve organisational goals. Given the multifaceted nature of workplace communication involves exchanging information among various parties and across multiple communication channels, such competence helps to mitigate potential internal or external conflicts.

Finally, the preference for sociolinguistic competence ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.241$) and strategic competence ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.49$) aligns with key findings from previous research (Gan et al., 2017; Kamil & Anuar, 2022) and further highlights their importance in workplace communication. In practice, this means that employers value graduates who can clearly understand their own responsibilities, provide constructive feedback and build and maintain relationships. Graduates with these skills are seen as effective communicators and valuable assets to any organisation as they play a vital role in engaging with others and achieving professional success (Zulkeifli et al., 2023). From a theoretical perspective, these findings can be interpreted through the lens of communicative competence. Sociolinguistic competence reflects the ability to communicate appropriately while showing

interpersonal sensitivity. Strategic competence, in comparison, enables individuals to manage communication gaps or disruptions, and discourse competence entails the ability to construct cohesion in communication.

Conclusion

Findings from this study provide a valuable insight into the elements of communicative competence preferred by employers, grounded in a robust and well-established theoretical framework. Data analysis from the findings revealed that sociolinguistic competence was the most highly valued aspect of communicative competence among employers, surpassing the strategic, discourse and grammatical competences. This preference implies that greater emphasis is placed on graduates' ability to use the language appropriately in social and cultural contexts, which is crucial for effective workplace communication.

The study has several pedagogical implications. Firstly, it highlights the need to integrate the components of communicative competence into the language curricula to ensure that students are adequately prepared for real world professional communication. Studies have reported that students often face challenges with fluency, as well as self-confidence (Kho & Ting, 2024), and may fail to make positive impressions during collaborative activities (Khamis & Wahi, 2021). Subsequently, these insights suggest that language teaching needs to go beyond grammar and vocabulary to foster students' confidence, social skills, and communicative abilities to enhance their ability to use English more effectively in real-world contexts.

The findings also concur with previous studies emphasising the importance of training strategies that focus on communicative competence. For example, Gan et al. (2017) found that strategy training centred on communication activities can significantly improve learners' English language competency, while also noting that merely providing communicative practice is insufficient to meaningfully enhance learners' oral communication skills. Similarly, Kamil and Anuar (2022) highlighted that employers value strategic competence to minimise communication breakdowns caused by language barriers. Such strategies enable fresh graduates to recognise their own weaknesses and identify opportunities to improve interactions with others. Importantly, the results obtained from this study also echo the main concerns raised by employers in Malaysia, who report that many local graduates struggle to communicate fluently and effectively in English, the primary medium of communication in most companies across the country (Ong et. al., 2022; Osman et. al., 2025; Yahaya & Miskam, 2024). It highlights the need for higher education institutions to take proactive measures such as integrating targeted communication training and workplace-relevant English language activities to better prepare graduates for professional environments.

However, as the findings of this study are based on questionnaire responses, in-depth insight into the employers' perceptions may not be fully comprehensive, as data may not capture the context of how these competencies are applied in real-world professional settings. To address this limitation, future research could incorporate qualitative methods, such as interviews, to gain understanding regarding the employers' preference for such language competencies. In addition, future

research could investigate learners perceived communicative competence to help address the persistent mismatch of English language skills needed at workplace. This would allow exploration of students' perspective on the specific communication and language skills required in the workplace, with the aim of understanding how they assess their readiness to use English meaningfully and appropriately in professional contexts. Such research could help reduce the mismatch between employers' expectations and graduates' self-assessed skills, a gap that has long contributed to employers' frequent complaints regarding lack of effective English communication skills in the workplace.

Communicative competence is a multifaceted construct that is essential for effective communication across various contexts. Hence, it is crucial for instructional approaches to integrate linguistic knowledge with sociocultural understanding and practical application. By adopting comprehensive approaches that address both the linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of communication, language teaching can better prepare students to navigate real-world workplace interactions and enhance their confidence. In doing so, it not only shifts the focus of language proficiency within the context of language teaching and learning but also responds to the practical language demands of the workplace.

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