

# TVET Graduates: The Importance of Workplace English Communication Skills for Effective Work Performance

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## Abstract

In both native and non-native English-speaking countries, English is becoming increasingly essential as the international business language. By performing research among employees of several companies in Sarawak, this article tries to determine the value of Workplace English Communication skills to work performance among TVET graduates. Data were triangulated from three different methods namely semi-structured interviews, observation, and reflective notes. Four employers were interviewed, and six employees were observed during the data collection phase. The findings suggest that the importance of workplace English Communication skills in the workplace has not altered, and participants have emphasized the importance of English as an influencing element in portraying a good image for the company. Furthermore, it has been discovered that good command of Workplace English Communication skills might enhance graduates' employment upon entering the job market and thus drive work excellence in the workplace. Furthermore, participants also stressed the practice of allowing flexibility and agility in the use of the English language depending on the situation and its formality. Most participants rated speaking as the most essential talent in the workplace, and they agreed that TVET graduates need to enhance their speaking abilities before entering the job market.

**Keywords:** Workplace English Communication Skills, TVET Graduates, Workplace Performance, English for Specific Purposes

## Introduction

Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is full-time, lifelong learning of technical and vocational training provided to people at various stages of life in order to prepare them for the job and contribute to national economic progress. Graduates of technical and vocational institutions help to meet the country's demand for technical

workers in a variety of industries. Malaysian Polytechnics is the country's largest TVET provider. It produces technical graduates in a wide range of technical and vocational fields, including business, hospitality, IT, and engineering. However, in today's globalized world, proficiency in the English language has emerged as a crucial determinant of professional success.

Effective command of English is fundamental to the growth of employment opportunities and its value is greatly appreciated worldwide. Communication is also of great importance since it is one of the core competencies of a TVET graduate and is built on technical skill sets. In multinational companies, global business engagements and even in corporate dealings, English is mostly used and is the first language. With specific reference to Sarawak, Malaysia, where English is the second official language, there is a growing concern over poor English proficiency among TVET graduates. The gap in communication has, in fact, constrained many graduates from illustrating their skills professionally and has resulted in losing out on employment. Nowadays, most companies interested in hiring personnel greatly focus on whether the applicant has both communication skills and technical skills as this benefits the organisation in terms of general working relations, dealing with clients, and public relations.

Although low-paying occupations may not demand sophisticated English skills, many employers expect graduates to have at least a basic understanding of the language in order to perform their duties. In today's society, several study findings underline the link between English and employment. Employees must have day-to-day business transactions and communication with executives from all over the world because of the globalized market. Emails, online chat, and corporate presentations all require 'above average' language abilities to ensure that information is conveyed in an unambiguous and straightforward manner to all parties.

Many studies across Asian nations have found that learning English improves work performance and increases the chances of advancement. Poor English language abilities, according to Ojanperä Miina (2014), slow down efficient communication, cause misunderstanding, induce frustration, and create obstacles among employees. English is the most often used language in the business sector and knowing English has become one of the most critical employability skills. Proper English encompasses not just the capacity to construct grammatically correct phrases, but also other associated abilities for successful communication, such as presentation, persuasion, and negotiating skills, as well as interpersonal communication skills. Because of the worldwide market, English language requirements are projected to rise every year, and employees who lack appropriate English language abilities may find it difficult to advance professionally.

As more school leavers embrace TVET education, questions around the quality and employability of graduates are springing up. A key problem observed is the poor TVET graduates' English communication abilities (Ramamurthy et al., 2021). Most companies that make English the language of business expect high efficiency and the ability to communicate to set organisational standards.

The study provides an alternate view while arguing that TVET graduates make up a

significant segment of the technical workforce, and therefore it is imperative to understand how their English communication skills affect their performance at work. These professional competencies enable one to transmit and receive the required information, forecast challenges posed in the working environment, and structure responses to various professional contexts (Kermode, 2017). On the other hand, job performance is the ability to meet precast work-related objectives and aid in the success of the organisation (Campbell et al., 1990).

The objective of this study is to get more insights on how Workplace English Communication Skills contribute to effective work performance of TVET graduates. The research is interested in how these factors influence work opportunities, job performance, and career growth by evaluating employer expectations and communication barriers in the workplace. These concerns posit a challenge of balancing the TVET training and their demands from the workplace which ultimately decreases the employability and career growth of the TVET graduates.

### **Literature Review**

When it comes to dealing with a polytechnic heterogeneous pool of graduates, employability is a critical factor for many countries. It is often assumed that one of the main reasons for the dearth of employment among graduates from Malaysia, South Africa, Nepal, and other countries is their possible lack of English proficiency, which eventually leads to poor communication skills (Cheong et al. 2016; Wafa et al. 2020). Social and communication skills are a necessary employability skill set for Malaysian graduates of TVET. Most of the industry experts that were interviewed said that the majority of Malaysian TVET graduates have sufficient technical skills. Their deficits are clear when it comes to oral skills (Bassah & Noor, 2023).

The purpose of this study is to assess the employer's perspective on the importance of English proficiency in the workplace. In the majority of countries, English is the primary language, and it is critical for new graduates to have a strong command of the language in order to interact effectively in the workplace. Regardless of the nature of employment or the various sectors in which one may be employed, whether an engineer, a medical graduate, a lawyer, or an accountant, they must all be skilled in English in order to flourish in their respective professions (Jackling and Natoli 2015).

According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), English language competency is demonstrated by a student's or learner's ability to write, listen, read, and talk in English. People often take proficiency tests to demonstrate that they are linguistically skilled and can effectively speak, write, or perform the acquired language. Employees must be able to interact successfully in a varied workplace where people come from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, according to current work dynamics. They need a common language that everyone can understand in order to communicate effectively in a diverse workplace. The English language is one solitary language that is incredibly popular and widely used all over the world for this specific function. Employers from a variety of industries demand that all graduates be fluent in English at all times (Eldeen et al. 2018).

As new employees, fresh graduates are expected to provide immediate and increased value to their employers. Every country has its own quota of new graduates each year, and the optimum skills and competencies vary with time in accordance with the labour market's needs and expectations. Professional institutions play a critical role in empowering and teaching these graduates about the unique behaviours that will allow them to influence societies once they enter the workforce. According to Eldeen et al. (2018), employability should not be a consideration; rather, the unique characteristics that can contribute to a graduate's overall profile should be the primary focus. There is, however, a lot of pressure to make sure that the graduates who graduate each year are "employable," which means that they have the skills that the market requires. Employers are getting increasingly picky in recent years, and they are the ones who will ensure that graduates land their ideal and most-suited jobs (Eldeen et al. 2018). Employers have often expressed their concern about graduates' inadequate communication skills, which is plainly a vital aspect for employability wherever in the globe, according to numerous studies. This is one of the reasons why most fresh graduates throughout the world are unemployed, and it is suggested that colleges spend more on their graduates to ensure that they are a suitable match for the corporate sector (Eldeen et al. 2018).

Any good, competitive workplace needs good communication, and that can only happen if everyone in the company has good communication skills. As times have changed, workplaces have also changed a lot. Because of globalization, the workforces have become more different. If you want to be able to communicate with more people at work, you'll need to know English well. Communication is very important to the productivity of an organization because it allows employees to work together and efficiently as a team. So, studies show that in order to communicate, you should be able to speak English well, not just in your own country but also in other countries around the world.

Different surveys show that poor English skills are the most common and most common problem in workplace communication. There is a study that shows that poor English communication skills and not being able to understand questions from the interviewer are common in interviews for graduates (Su-Hie Ting et al. 2017). This shows that communication skills play a big part in the workplace when it comes to making new graduates into professionals. Professionals who try to improve their communication skills have a better chance of moving up in their jobs all over the world. Professionals who have mastered the art of communication have been able to communicate more effectively with their peers, clients, and other people from the same or even different organisations (Byrne 2020).

Research shows that all professionals need to be able to speak English well in order to be able to communicate well at work. There are a lot of young professionals and graduates who don't have the basic communication skills they need to be able to talk about their feelings, thoughts, and ideas both verbally and in writing. As a result, many employers aren't happy with the new graduates because they can't speak well when they work. Moore and Morton (2017) say that new graduates need to show off their communication skills by being confident in interviews, working well with other people, and making good phone calls. It is important for workers to be able to speak and write in English. This will not only help them in the future, but it will also help them make their mark across cultural and

international boundaries (Eldeen et al. 2018).

**Methodology**

In this study, a qualitative research approach was utilized. This is due to the researcher's desire to know and has a deeper comprehension of the process in comparison to the findings of the study (Creswell and Creswell 2017). The researcher's main goal in this investigation was to figure out employers' opinions of the importance of Workplace English Communication Skills for Effective work performance. Qualitative analysis, according to Parahoo (1997), focuses on people's relationships while simultaneously stressing the individual's distinctiveness. According to Burns and Grove (2005), a qualitative method is a formal subjective technique used to describe life events and circumstances in order to attribute meaning to them.

According to Creswell (2009), because the investigators' major purpose is to gain an in-depth knowledge of polytechnic graduates' English communication abilities in the professional context, a multiple case study is the most appropriate approach for this inquiry. The goal of this investigation was to learn as much as possible about the situation. The researcher used three distinct data collecting methods, including semi-structured interviews and observation, to get qualitative data for this study and assure triangulation. Furthermore, field notes were used to enrich and add to the qualitative data collected through both study approaches in order to capture extra information and eliminate any gaps.

The researcher will change and merge all of the data at various phases of the inquiry (Creswell and Creswell 2017). To be more explicit, this case study is classed as an intrinsic case study since the researcher's purpose was to analyze the complexities of the situation and offer a full explanation of the facts. As a result, the study's findings could not be extended to other settings or the general population (Stake 1995). It may, however, be meaningful to a group of people who have the same qualities, according to Miles and Huberman (1994). One is in line with the researcher's objective, which is not to study this circumstance in order to gain a better knowledge of others.

**Finding and Analysis**

This study targeted to explore the importance of Workplace English Communication skills from the point of view of employers. In order to see what are the importance of Workplace English Communication skills for effective work performance, four employers and six employees were selected to participate in this study. Thematic analysis is used to present the data triangulation. Based on the data analysis, four themes have emerged in seeing the perspective of the importance of English Workplace Communication Skills among employers as illustrated in figure 4.1; (1) Portraying corporate image and good business relationships, (2) Driving work excellence, (3) Enhancing graduates' employability and (3) Flexibility and agility in the workplace.

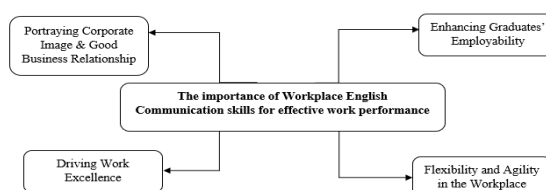


Figure 4.1 The four important themes of the findings

Table 4.1 shows their pseudonym, business type, the position of the participant, company size and location of the companies. There were four participants in this study. All the companies are located in different parts of Sarawak, Malaysia and share the same characteristics of being start-up companies. Start-up companies are companies built in less than 10 years. These participants are among the managerial group in their respective companies who had direct engagement with the polytechnic graduates in the workplace.

Table 4.1

*Participants' Demographic Profile*

Pseudonym	Business Type	Position	Company Size (pax)	Location
E1	Printing	Director	15 – 20	Miri
E2	Agricultural / Civil	Manager	10	Sibu
E3	Printing	Managing Director	7	Mukah
E4	Civil Engineering	Senior Manager	10-15	Sibu

*Portraying Corporate Image and Maintaining Good Business Relationships.*

All employers stressed the importance of Workplace English Communication skills among the workers because it portrays the corporate image of the company. This claim was made by employers when asked about the importance of the English language in their line of business. The use of the English language is not only limited within the internal organization but also further extended to other companies such as suppliers and clients. The use of the English language between other companies would give a sense of establishment and sounds more professional.

“Even...even in our workplace, among college, they don't speak English. They speak our native language, but somehow, when they have to deal with bigger company or organization or even the bosses err ... like me.. When I'm serious I... I... love to give orders in English so they felt that I am serious lah” (E1, SSI)

“...most of the conversation sometimes the customer prefer to speak in English ...not because of the ...the...the requirement but...but I believe some...some customer they prefer to speak in English just to be ...just to be more professional. So, I think the English is very important in any job of scope that anyone entered to lah. So, it's important.” (E1, SSI)

Somehow, the use of the English language has become the nature of workplace communication. Apart from the corporate image, the use of the English language is seen as what comes together with the job. It is important to maintain a good business relationship where both parties could agree upon something together through communication. The use of the English language is crucial to maintaining a good relationship with suppliers and clients.

“Normally we just use the native language, Bahasa Melayu Sarawak. Because all are locals. Sometimes during meetings, I will mix some English terms to refer to a particular thing related to work lah. But when dealing with clients or suppliers, sometimes we need to use English.” (E2, SSI)

“Yeap. Everything. Dealing with supplier. Even kita cakap Bahasa, still juga supplier cakap English. So, mesti tau. (Even when we speak in Malay, the supplier would respond in

English. So, we must know).” (E3, SSI)

“Our business line requires us to be able to communicate effectively and English medium is one of the important elements in this line of business. Because it is important for them communicate with clients, suppliers and so on. We run an agricultural company and also involve is some civil works. So, we have many type of people that we deal with. So English is very much important to us. It give good image and can get recommendation by others to do business with us.” (E4, SSI)

#### *Driving Work Excellence*

TVET graduates could perform well because having good Workplace English Communication skills would enable the employee to drive their work to excellence. One of the participants mentioned a good future the graduate would benefit from if English communication skills were mastered upon graduating. In a growing company, there are plenty of opportunities to be grabbed by fresh graduates and English communication skills are one of the important criteria in the employers’ list.

From another perspective, an employee with good Workplace English Communication Skills would easily be adjusting to various work tasks or environments. When the employees are asked to do a different task which was not their regular routine, they could easily adapt quickly, especially when dealing with types of machinery and software that uses an English language interface. Hence, their work performance is not jeopardized when they are familiar with the operating language. In this case, the English language.

“Well to have some somebody you know, that can speak good English for sure. They will be highly sort you know, among the employers you know, to help the companies for the internalizations. They can speak good English at the higher level. so, in the future I believe that English is very much needed and then those that are excellence, you know in English can get you higher chance of getting employed and also can have a better growth in the companies.” (E1, SSI)

“Mostly focusing on printing. Everyone can do all job, but everyone of them have their own specific task too. Sebab operating machine and all about IT in English bah.” (E3, SSI)

“Job Specs are given in Malay but in order to get the work done, like ordering parts, contacting suppliers and so on, need someone with good English background. So far this person, the polytechnic graduates meet our expectation and can get the job done.” (E2, SSI)

#### *Enhancing Graduates’ Employment*

Another undoubted fact that has been mentioned in many previous studies is regarding the enhancement of graduates’ employment. Having retained good Workplace English Communication skills would certainly increase their marketability. Language ability is seen as an added value by employers. Employers would prefer someone with high English language proficiency with the ability to talk and present their ideas well to others. All employers in this study agreed that the ideal candidate is someone who has good communication skills, is able to deliver their ideas well, is motivated, and possesses high self-esteem. According to them, these are the values that they will assess during a job interview.

“As long as their candidates... as well as the students....as long as their graduates, able to understand, have the ability and confidence to speak English, I think Is it is good enough.” (E1, SSI)

“Because nowadays job vacancy is limited, graduates are many. So, the competition is there when the students graduated. It is not easy to find job nowadays. So those with added values, those with more skills, normally will have better chances. Those yang cukup makan, susah nak carik makan lah. So good communication skills not only in English, should be one of the added value a fresh graduate has. Iban language kah...Chinese kah...English, for internalization purpose of the company would be a great asset.” (E2, SSI)

“So, upon recruiting, one of the important criteria is about their soft skills. Candidates must be able to communicate well with confident in presenting their ideas or talking to our customers. They also have to know how to treat customer well. We are doing printing business, so we deal a lot with customers and suppliers.” (E3, SSI)

#### *Flexibility and Agility in the Workplace*

Even though English proficiency is emphasized by the majority of employers, day-to-day usage, however, is not as rigid as it sounds. All employers have been very supportive in encouraging their employees to improve Workplace English Communication skills. This is illustrated by the flexibility they allow in the usage of the English language in the workplace during informal settings. At the same time, they would also stress the importance of getting the language correct in a certain setting.

Since all employers are local enterprises, they do not mind the usage of any kind of variations to the English language such as Manglish in the workplace for informal use. The priority on the use of correct English relies on the settings and whenever they are working on a work-related document for tender purposes and quotations.

“For me, as long as we're comfortable they're comfortable and they understand what they want to deliver, I think Manglish or whatever whatever loghat that we have whatever accent that we have, shouldn't be any problem actually.” (E1, SSI)

“Yes indeed. Especially in informal communication. We always do that right...because we don't really speak ... perfect English all the time.” (E2, SSI)

“For me, I accept both, but when it come to the formal situation, I need to make sure the use of proper English such as in preparing document or any other important document. This is to maintain our professionalism and to show a good image of our company lah.” (E3, SSI)

“Yes, sure no problem. It is accepted as long it reflect to improve communication skills. Sometimes we also speak English with Malay accent or even Malay words mix up. That is our nature here. To me no problem. But if related to work, then need to use proper English lah. Like preparing documents, proposals, making quotations and so on, that one must be using proper English. We need to show good image. Our staff reflect our image.” (E4, SSI)

#### **Discussion**

This study explored the importance of Workplace English Communication Skills for



effective work performance for TVET graduates. The findings explained in the thematic analysis highlighted four important themes that contribute to effective work performance with regard to Workplace English Communication Skills.

#### *The Importance of Corporate Image to the Industry*

When there was much emphasis given on the importance of the English language for the workplace to execute a certain task, or as a common language that everyone can understand to communicate effectively in a diverse workplace (Eldeen et al. 2018), or for being confident in interviews, working well with other people, and making good phone calls (Moore and Morton 2017), in sustaining the business affairs, less highlight was given as how good English workplace communication skills would contribute to the company's corporate image.

Workplace English Communication Skills is important as it portrays the corporate image of the company. With a correct image according to the profession of the employees, they are the reflection of the company as to how people would perceive them. The image of professionalism is important regardless of the nature of employment or the various sectors in which one may be employed, whether an engineer, a medical graduate, a lawyer, or an accountant. This is aligned to the research by Jackling and Natoli (2015), where employees must all be skilled in English in order to flourish in their respective professions. This is one of the reasons why employers would employ someone with good English language commands as they are the ambassador and the icon of the company.

Therefore, three out of four employers have mentioned the concern over the corporate image reflected by their workers. Maintaining and sustaining a business is important and having a good corporate image is essential to ensure they are relevant as the player in the industry. The sense of professionalism in giving the best possible service will be depending on their business front liners. That is why English Workplace Communication is considered as one of the important elements in ensuring effective work performance.

#### *Enhancing TVET Graduates' Employability*

Entering the job market has been the most challenging phase for fresh graduates. Based on the previous studies done by Su-HieTing et al. (2017), it was found that the most common lack among graduates is in their English communication skills during job interviews where most candidates not being able to understand questions from the interviewer. Moore and Morton (2017) also stressed the importance of graduates being able to showcase their communication skills during job interviews.

The above-mentioned findings from previous research are aligned with the findings from this study where the same concerns were highlighted by the employers and how workplace English Communication skills are important to secure a position in a company. Start-up companies expect someone who has good communication skills with the ability to deliver their ideas and thoughts. This is because there are plenty of opportunities that can be grabbed by start-ups as they grow and scale up their business. A person with good technical and communication skills especially English language would be given a priority to fill in the job vacancy.

This is true as start-up companies are companies that are trying to fit into and position themselves in the industry. By hiring a talented fresh graduate with excellent technical and soft skills, particularly in English communications, they can grow faster and compete with other competitors in the industry.

#### *Driving Work Excellence with Flexibility and Agility*

Without a doubt, good communication skills can increase work performance. This study revealed that employers with good Workplace English Communication skills can perform better and would have bright future careers. This is parallel with the development of technology in which most types of machinery and software nowadays are developed with multiple international languages in the language preference for users to choose as the operating language. English is one of the languages available for selection together with French, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese or Germanic.

In the context of Sarawak, Malaysia, the most common language is English as it is considered the second language in the country. Hence, employees with good English proficiency can perform well and are able to execute work-related tasks successfully by operating such machinery or software. This is aligned with a study done by Campbell (1990) where the purpose of job performance is meant to reach certain goals in the organization.

Besides that, regardless of how important mastery of the English language is for the workplace, the employers all agreed that room for improvement should be given to those who are already in the company to increase their language ability. The acceptance of some variation of the English language among the employees is normal for the purpose of improving their proficiency. Flexibility and tolerance are the approaches used by companies to expose their employee to familiarity with the English language. Employers believe that language skills can be developed over time to reach the desired proficiency.

However, the use of proper English is still given a high priority, especially in formal related work such as tender writing, quotations, and advertisements. Communication with suppliers, clients and customers is crucial to be conducted in a formal English language to avoid miscommunications. This is to ensure efficiency and maintain professionalism in the workplace which is aligned with what was mentioned by Byrne (2020) where effective communication is crucial for the purpose of communicating with peers, clients, and other people from the same different organizations.

Thus, Workplace English Communication Skills is important for good corporate image & maintaining business relations, enhancing employment for TVET graduates, driving work performance in the respective field and achieving agility in work production. Hence, this study is significant in understanding the employers' perceptions towards Workplace English Communication Skills with regard to their business nature and settings.

#### **Conclusion**

This study makes an important contribution to the TVET graduates and also TVET training providers in understanding the importance of Workplace English Communication Skills and how it affects work performance. This study is also able to reflect the perceptions and expectations of employers towards fresh TVET graduates in positioning themselves in

the industry. Findings suggest that there are four elements in the importance of Workplace English Communication Skills namely to portray corporate image & good business relationships, enhance graduates' employment, drive work excellence, and for flexibility and agility in work. The findings are significant in understanding the perceptions of employers towards Workplace English Communication skills and how it could affect work performance. This study is, however, limited to the context of small and medium enterprise companies or start-ups. These companies are in the growing process and their perception might be different from other levels or types of employers with bigger business sizes. Despite the differences, it creates an opportunity to explore this topic in-depth among a bigger population sample size. Therefore, with a better understanding of the importance of Workplace English Communication skills and how they could affect workplace performance, TVET training providers need to further enhance their curricula in order to meet the industrial expectations towards TVET graduates.

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