

# English Language Competency in Enhancing Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) Graduates' Marketability in the Malaysian Workplace: A Literature Review

Mohamad Sobri Suhaili<sup>1,2</sup>, Maslawati Mohamad<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Politeknik Mukah Sarawak, Mukah, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

Email: sobri@pmu.edu.my

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## Abstract

TVET graduates contribute greatly to the country's development. Issues regarding the readiness of TVET graduates upon entering the industry have been raised especially on their level of proficiency in the English language. English language proficiency is important and has become one of the top five reasons for recruiting fresh graduates. Not only do TVET graduates need to excel in technical skills, but they also need to be equipped with other essential skills such as communication skills especially English language competency. Employers place strong communication skills at the top of their priority list, and this is the first thing they look for in every new employee interested in working for their separate businesses. TVET education content needs to be on par with the industrial demand and the active role of the industries in giving direct feedback to the educational institutions is crucial. Therefore, this study aims to highlight the importance of English competency and the challenges of teaching English in technical institutions. Apart from that, this study also suggests some measures that can be implemented in enhancing TVET graduates' marketability in the workplace.

## Keywords

TVET Graduates, English Competency, Marketability, English for the Workplace

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## 1. Introduction

Based on the Malaysian Department of Polytechnic and Community College

Educations' website, Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is full time and a lifelong learning of technical and vocational training offered to individuals from various stages in the society in preparing them for the working environment to contribute to the national economic growth. Among the institutions that offer TVET under the Ministry of Education Malaysia is Malaysian Technical University (MTUN) which consists of UTHM, UNiMAP, UTeM and UMP, Polytechnics, Community Colleges, Vocational Colleges and Technical Secondary Schools. The Department of Polytechnic and Community College Education aims to be the leading-edge TVET institution in Malaysia. The graduate marketability rate of the year 2018 for Polytechnic was 96.1% while 96.5% for Community College (Department of Polytechnic Education, 2021).

Sulaiman and Salleh (2016) mentioned that as Malaysia is heading towards becoming a higher advanced income nation in the near future, it is important to keep on developing and strengthening skilled workers' competencies by ensuring that suitable education and training is done to cater to the needs of the industry and business. TVET institutions have always played their role in producing semi-professional workers through their comprehensive programme structures focusing more on students' hands-on in developing their technical skills.

Much emphasis on TVET has been given by the government through the implementation of the National Education Blueprint for Higher Education and the JPPKK Strategic Plan 2018-2025. This study will therefore help in understanding the importance of English competency among TVET graduates in enhancing their marketability in the workplace.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. TVET Education in Malaysia

TVET aims to provide semi-professional workers to cater the demand of the technical workforce in various industries. Some industries employ up to 70% TVET graduates in the companies' new enrolment of manpower. According to the National Key Economic Area (NKEA), twelve important industries are demanding TVET workers which offer up to 1.3 million jobs nationwide in Malaysia. Among the industries are oil, gas and energy, palm oil, financial services, tourism, business services, electronics and electrical, wholesale and retail, education, health, information and communication technology, agricultural and greater Kuala Lumpur (PEMANDU, 2010). Malaysia has progressively developed ever since according to the roadmap laid out.

With a high demand for TVET workers in the workforce, TVET education has become one of the most popular fields for school leavers to pursue their studies as it is seen to benefit them to enter the promising job markets (Azli, Shah, & Maslawati, 2018). Malaysian Polytechnic takes up the greatest number of TVET students where there are up to 98,000 students currently studying in 32 polytechnics nationwide. TVET education in Malaysia is geared to upskill the human capital to meet the demand of the industry by providing quality educa-

tion and training and provide resources for further education or entrepreneurial pursuits on the TVET country profile for Malaysia (UNESCO, 2019).

When the demand for TVET education is high, there are several issues in the quality of graduates produced since the TVET education structure is comprehensive of theoretical and skill-based learning. Among the issues related to TVET graduates is the lack of English competency in the related field which affected their performance in the workplace as well as to obtain employment at entry level as stressed by Zainuddin et al. (2019).

Therefore, due to the lack of English language competency in the targeted field, employers have raised this issue during the annual meeting between the TVET institution with the representatives from the industries as it affects the operational performance of the business (Azli, Shah, & Maslawati, 2018). This paper will look at the challenges of teaching English in technical education in more detail and later suggests some measures to address the challenges.

## **2.2. The Importance of English Language Competency to the Industry**

Besides exposing the students on technical and vocational attributes, TVET education is also grooming the students' soft skills and other essential skills to help market themselves upon graduating. Among the important skills, one needs to master are communication skills, job hunting skills, problem solving skills and collaboration skills. Yusof et al. (2017) in their study mentioned that graduates might fail to market themselves if they are unable to communicate in English as technical skills alone are insufficient especially if they are targeting an international market. Students who graduated from TVET institutions have big potential to explore the job market in the country and abroad since technical skills are needed worldwide. For them to explore the job market, they need to have a strong charisma to attract potential employers. One of the ways to show a good personality and to attract the employers is by having a good communication skill, especially the ability to speak and converse in English which seems to be a problem to some TVET graduates.

Ting et al. (2017) in their study stated three reasons for the importance of English competency in the workplace. Firstly, it is due to the fact that the company uses English language as a working language. For a worker to deliver and perform in the organization, mastering English language is a must in this situation. Second important reason is depending on the types of job such as marketing, customer service, bank frontline and insurance jobs, where English proficiency is demanded upon recruiting. The third reason may not be seen important at the starting point of the career, however it becomes more important later in the career for promotion and career development purposes.

Graduates with competent English language proficiency are desired by most employers because having high proficiency in English is considered as an important asset in the context of the world's economy (Saleh and Murtaza, 2018). Working environment nowadays requires the use of various integration of mul-

multiple skills with communication skills ranked as the most important skills of all as mentioned by [Powzi and Yamat \(2017\)](#). Fresh graduates are expected to know how to communicate effectively, send email with appropriate language tone, and deliver efficient presentation both in a small and large audience. Besides that, information sharing, problem solving, strategic decision making, casual discussion, and reciprocal connection within and beyond the organisation as mentioned by [Mikkola and Valo \(2019\)](#) are all examples of workplace communication that are expected to be mastered by fresh graduates worldwide. These attributes are also significant in the context of Malaysian workplace because until 2020, there are a total of 1.18 million registered business in Malaysia covering six main sectors namely services, wholesale and retail trade, construction, manufacturing, agriculture, and mining and quarrying. These are the sectors that hire our local fresh graduates as these sectors are contributing greatly to the national economic growth ([Mahidin, 2020](#)).

### 2.3. The Challenges of Teaching English in the Technical Education

As to contribute to become a high-income country, there is a need to transform TVET's existing vocational education system ([Rasul et al. 2015](#)). A new system of vocational education is designed to produce holistic human capitals that can face challenges, nationally or globally. Thus, highly trained workforces can be produced to meet the country's needs particularly in the job market ([Rasul et al., 2015](#)).

To be competitive globally in today's world, one needs to master one foreign language, at least English since it is one of the required proficiencies in 21st-century global education and competence ([Telaunmbanua, 2017](#)). The use of the English language is widely applied especially in the field of technical and vocational since most of the resources are in English. Besides that, the ability to communicate well in English is also another key success in order to be competitive in the race of global competition.

However, the teaching of the English language in a TVET environment is challenging as English is not classified as the main subject content but rather a requirement for the students to only pass ([Abdullah & Majid, 2013](#)). TVET institutions are advised to focus on developing students' generic skills which include communication skills as suggested by [Jamaludin & DeWitt \(2018\)](#). Thus, the teaching of the English language in TVET institutions has become a major challenge among ESL lecturers because there is a need to expose the students not only with basic communication skills, but also English for the workplace.

[Ismail et al. \(2018\)](#) mentioned that some vocational-technical teachers found it is challenging to teach the content courses in the English language due to their inability to speak and write in English. Therefore, there is a need for technical teachers to attend appropriate training and courses to enhance their English language skills. [Ismail et al. \(2018\)](#) also mentioned that vocational-technical teachers should undergo appropriate training and have ample exposure in the

industry to ensure that they learn the knowledge and skills in the designated field. There is also a need for technical teachers to be able to use the English language comfortably during the lesson. [Ismail et al. \(2018\)](#) suggested that teachers should be able to use the English language in delivering the lessons besides ensuring the students' understanding of the subject content. This will equip them with the knowledge and technical terms which could help motivate them in teaching the subjects and preparing the students to enter the working environment.

[Ismail et al. \(2018\)](#) in their study have highlighted that the production of a skillful marketable future workforce in Malaysia depends on the competency and positive attitudes of vocational teachers. To ensure the marketability of the graduates, TVET graduates also need to enhance their English proficiency level at the same time. TVET graduates must be aware that English language proficiency is one of the important factors to ascertain graduates' marketability and employability ([Poon, 2016](#)). Apart from that, [Ismail et al. \(2018\)](#) also include that students should be able to comprehend content courses conducted in the English language so that they can further enhance their level of proficiency. [Yaakob \(2017\)](#) in his study supported that in becoming a statutory body, Polytechnic should be able to provide skilled candidates as needed by the industry and country. This can only be achieved by high-quality teaching approaches. The educators should be competent both in terms of content and pedagogical aspects.

#### **2.4. The Lack of English Language Competency among TVET Graduates**

The lack of language competency among TVET students has made them less competitive which consequently creates a communication barrier at the workplace ([Saleh and Murtaza, 2018](#)). This could be a challenge for them to adapt to the working environment. It is supported by the claim made by [Tajuddin et al. \(2017\)](#) on the dissatisfaction level of Malaysian employers on the general level of preparedness of graduates for the workplace. Fresh graduates seem to neglect the importance of the English language and its use in the workplace. Another study by [Amiruddin et al. \(2015\)](#) reported that the weaknesses of current graduates are communication skills, English language proficiency, and leadership skills.

Besides that, the lack of language competency also leads to low marketability value. Graduates would face difficulty in marketing themselves due to the lack of English language competency especially when interviews are carried out in English (source). A poor command of English is one of the top five reasons for not hiring fresh graduates as mentioned by [Zainuddin et al. \(2019\)](#). Besides specific technical competencies, graduates are hired for a certain level of communications, social, emotional, and critical thinking skills ([Tajuddin et al., 2017](#)).

Apart from that, due to the incompetence of local graduates in communication, the industry will depend more on foreign skilled workers since they can communicate in English more effectively. With excellent language competency, the industry could gain more benefits especially when there is a need to deal

with foreign investors, workers, and clients. This is certainly not healthy for the local economy since it contributes to the increase of unemployment rate among local graduates. There are approximately 1.99 million foreign workers registered in the country under the Temporary Visiting Work Permit, which is equivalent to 8.71% of the total labour force in Malaysia for the fourth quarter of 2019 (Mahidin, 2020). According to the same report, the unemployment number of Malaysian is 512,200 people at the same period. Therefore, it is high time that drastic measures should be made to equip the local workforce with the necessary skills and competence. Local graduates especially TVET should be prepared to reduce the language competency gap.

## 2.5. English Language Proficiency and Employability

Success in the job market is contingent on a variety of different factors. Consider the Australian job market; research indicates that employers' first preference is for "professional skills" specific to the relevant field, followed by the candidate's "well-roundedness," which includes unique personal characteristics, communication skills, and proficiency in the English language. The survey discovered that English language proficiency is a requirement for the majority of occupations in the Australian labour market. Similarly, numerous researches have demonstrated the importance of the English language in a similar manner. Clearly, English Language Communication proficiency is critical for employment and general success in any job market. According to a research conducted on immigrants with advanced academic credentials, English language competence was more important in achieving superior professional outcomes in terms of earnings, employment, and prestige in an occupation than any other quality (Harder et al. 2015). Additionally, another study revealed that when English-speaking and non-English-speaking migrants were compared on their work results, English-speaking migrants demonstrated a stronger command of their careers and were overall higher performers (Harder et al. 2015).

In looking into the Malaysian context, Ting et al. (2017) conducted an extensive survey of ten companies in Malaysia to ascertain their perceptions of graduates' employability and English language skills. The research found several intriguing facets of an employer's viewpoint while employing graduates from the job market. Evidently, all companies have placed strong communication skills at the top of their priority list, and this is the first thing they look for in every prospective employee (Ting et al., 2017). Effective communication skills include the fundamental capacity to communicate with the individuals you are speaking with at a meeting or conference, the ability to interact successfully with the rest of the group, and the ability to mix in big groups. According to the participants, effective communication skills are not limited to speaking and interpersonal abilities; rather, it is an employee's inclination to communicate with individuals from diverse departments and levels. It is preferable if workplace communication is versatile. Employers were definitely of the opinion that the graduate must

possess appropriate communication skills, which may cause other individuals to get confused about the entire situation. Employers emphasised presentation and how they saw immigrants to be more confident in their presenting abilities as seen by their body language. One company even agreed that if an applicant has limited English skills but is confident and their body language conveys a powerful message, the employer is satisfied that the graduates have the necessary expertise to function in their field of work. Knowledge is the foundation of everything; it makes no difference if an individual does not speak fluent English or is a bit less flexible in terms of their collective interaction skills. However, the majority of employers thought that employees who are more technical in nature, interacting with machines and cables on a daily basis, are likely to score low on communication skills, which is “OK” because communication is not necessary for their job.

### **3. Conclusion and Implications**

The development of TVET modules should involve both the education institution as well as the industry. When there are constant and frequent interactions between both parties, feedbacks from the industry could help the institution to construct their modules while giving some ideas to the institution about the expectations and requirements set by the industry.

#### **3.1. Strengthening Collaboration with Industries**

The signing of Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) or the Certificate of Collaboration (CoC) with industries is a good way to maintain a good rapport between both parties. This ongoing practice needs to be strengthened and agreed items listed in the MoU need to be implemented or executed proactively. The collaboration of both educational institution and industry in a more structured way surely benefit the students in terms of preparing them for the workplace.

In addressing this matter, educational institutions should have a strong partnership with industries. To fulfill the expected language competency by the industry, educational institutions and industries must work hand in hand in producing a competent TVET graduate. This could benefit the educational institutions in terms of providing the students with industrial-related programmes which allow more exposure to the students with easy access to the industrial practice and working environment, and a revised syllabus that suits better to the current needs of the industry. The industry, on the other hand, gets to contribute to producing highly skilled TVET graduates according to their needs and preferences. Some examples of partnership programmes are the Industrial Advisory Programme, CEO Faculty Programme, and Industrial Advisory Meeting.

#### **3.2. Lecturer’s Industrial Attachment (LIA) Programme**

The Lecturers’ Industrial Attachment (LIA) Programme gives first-hand experiences to the teaching lecturers. To equip the students with sufficient prepara-

tion for the workplace, lecturers must experience being in the industry themselves. This practice must be emphasized more to develop competency among the lecturers regarding to the exposures they obtain from the programmes which include their competency of English language for workplace purposes. Lecturers get the first-hand experience during the programme and later contribute to their institution as they returned.

In conclusion, the level of competency in English language and communication skills, and the level of employers' satisfaction on TVET graduated are important to increase or enhance the graduates' marketability in the workplace. Educational institutions, industry players, as well as government bodies, must collaborate proactively in producing highly marketable graduates to cater to the needs of the workforce in driving the country into a highly productive nation.

### 3.3. Summary

Through the exploration of this literature review, this could contribute to a better understanding of the situation on a macro level perspective of the perceived competency of English language competency among TVET graduates by the industries. In this regard, this study would give a significant awareness and a comprehensive understanding of what could stake holders do to address the issue of TVET graduates especially in the mastery of the English language.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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