



Professional communication competence in English for occupational purposes (EOP) courses: A systematic literature review and proposal of a framework

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Abstract

This paper reports a systematic literature review that was conducted to explore the areas of research pertaining to English language workplace communication needs in order to design courses in English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) that can better meet the demands of the industry. Articles from Scopus, ScienceDirect and Emerald Insight were extracted following the five-step method of conducting a systematic literature review. In total, 133 articles were analysed. From the analysis, it was found that most studies focused on examining the needs of the learners, or the needs of the industry; very few studies triangulated the findings between different stakeholders to obtain a better picture of the needs, wants, and gaps between the target situation and the present situation. Additionally, most studies focused on language tasks required and did not pay due emphasis on the competencies required to perform the tasks well. Thus, the outcome of this review is a proposed theoretical model to develop professional communication competence among new graduates that is intended to be used in a future study to address the gaps found in this review. Practically, the review also sheds light on gaps that exist in current research that can be addressed in future research, especially for higher education institutions (HEIs) that are working to design and develop courses in EOP to improve English language communication skills for employability.

Keywords: communicative competence, English language, workplace communication, needs, graduate employability, professional communication

Background

Graduate employability has long been identified as an important agenda in Malaysia. Like many countries, employability in Malaysia is measured by new graduates' ability to obtain employment within six months of leaving the university. However, the term 'employability' itself is more than just obtaining any job. According to the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, that was released by Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia (KPM) (otherwise known as the Malaysian Ministry of Education [MOE]) (2013), graduate employability is defined as graduates obtaining employment: (1) in an area related to their field of study, (2) based on their level of qualifications, and (3) at a salary consistent with the market rate for entry-level graduates in their chosen fields (Zainuddin et al., 2019). To ensure

that graduates leave the university with appropriate employability skills, the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF), which all higher education institutions (HEIs) need to adhere to for its programmes and qualifications, was revised in 2017 to focus on five clusters of learning outcomes, which are: (1) knowledge and understanding, (2) cognitive skills, (3) functional work skills, (4) personal and entrepreneurial skills, and (5) ethics and professionalism. Notably, these requirements apply to both content courses and skills courses (including language learning).

English has long been considered as the main language of communication in global business (Zainuddin et al., 2019), and Malaysia is one of several countries that has established English as the lingua franca of its multinational corporations. In 2016, Malaysia was included as a country that uses English as an official or *de facto* official language in a report titled 'English at Work: Global Analysis of Language Skills in the Workplace' by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), emphasising the importance of the English language in workplaces in Malaysia. In Malaysia, English is formally taught in schools as a compulsory subject beginning from Standard 1 in primary school to Form 5 at the end of secondary school. The Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM, or Malaysian Certificate of Education), which is compulsory for students finishing secondary school, has English as one of its five compulsory subjects. Prior to entering university, students are then required to sit for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), which tests students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. The test measures and classifies students' proficiency levels into four 'bands', where Bands 1 and 2 indicate extremely limited and limited users, while Bands 3 and 4 indicate modest to fluent users. Depending on the field of study chosen, these students are then subject to several compulsory English language courses in university, and the medium of instruction for the content courses of many universities in the country is also English. For some universities in Malaysia, an additional exit test is conducted to further measure their proficiency level upon leaving the university.

Yet, despite having eleven years of formal education of the English language alongside learning in English in university, local studies (Agus et al., 2011; Ahmad Tajuddin & Abdul Hamid, 2017; D'Silva, 2020; Kenayathulla et al., 2019; Ting et al., 2017) and newspaper reports (Dzulkifly, 2018; Lim, 2004) have time and again cited poor command of English as one of the main reasons why Malaysian graduates are unable to obtain employment. In the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025), the main concerns of employers in hiring new graduates include graduates' poor command of the English language and lack of good communication skills, as surveyed by Jobstreet in 2011. Some industries have also made clear that they would not hire graduates who do not meet the minimum English proficiency level required in the organisation (Sarudin et al., 2013), which establishes the crucial link between English language command and graduate employability in the country.

However, it should be noted that this phenomenon is not exclusive to Malaysia alone. In fact, many countries where English is learned as a second or foreign language, but which generally uses the language as the *de facto* business language, face similar issues. For instance, Erling (2015) cited numerous past studies which found that finding employment in Australia is more challenging for those with lower English language proficiency, especially in demonstrating written and oral communication skills. In the context of Bahrain and the Middle East, Thomas et al. (2016) also cited poor English language capability as one of the constraints of new graduates, while on the flipside, having good English communication skills is considered a unique selling point to employers. This has also been cited in other countries, such as China (Fan et al., 2017; Yao & Du-Babcock, 2020), Iran (Akbari, 2016; Karimi & Sanavi, 2014), Taiwan (Lu, 2018; Spence & Liu, 2013) Tanzania (Wilson Mwakapina, 2020), Norway (Hellekjær & Fairway, 2015), Bangladesh (Ahmed et al., 2020), and more.

As a result, HEIs internationally have continued to face the challenge of incorporating communication competencies into their curriculum design (Abelha et al., 2020), especially as an attempt to respond to accusations that they are producing graduates who lack the necessary soft skills to contribute to

the workplace (Jackson, 2010). Erling (2015) highlighted that for HEIs, the critical issue lies in developing a sustainable and integrated approach to improve proficiency.

In the context of Malaysia, the underlying question is clear: After receiving at least eleven years of formal instruction in the English language, coupled with tertiary education that is mainly delivered in English as its medium of instruction, what is missing? Is there anything else that can be done in universities to better prepare students to meet industry needs? The report in the Australian context by Erling (2015) noted the issue of using standardised language tests, as there seemed to be little evidence to suggest that they are valid and reliable instruments to measure employability even though some may predict academic achievement (Mohamad et al., 2020). This was echoed by a study conducted by Sarudin et al. (2013) who found that some employers have considered developing their own in-house standard tests if convincing assurance to current English language standards is lacking, as also mentioned by Erling (2015).

While the concerns seem systemic in nature, the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) alluded to the need for HEIs to establish ongoing communication and collaboration with industries to ensure courses remain relevant to industry needs, which by extension also translates into producing work-ready graduates who are equipped with the necessary communication skills to succeed. In the context of HEIs in Malaysia, each HEI often has its own language centre that provides English language courses and conducts research to ensure they are equipping students with the necessary communication skills required for their field of study. Such courses usually fall under the umbrella of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP). This has led to studies of university-industry mismatch or educational mismatch (Abdullah, 2013; Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Kenayathulla et al., 2019) to identify the needs of the industry and determine whether current EOP courses have addressed such needs. Yet, the findings seem inconclusive and recent research continues to call upon language competence as an issue among new graduates. This calls for the need to conduct a systematic review to ascertain the scope of research that has been conducted in this area so far to ascertain other areas of study that can be pursued.

Thus, the purpose of this review is to determine the scope of research that has been done to define and determine the English language competence levels required by fresh graduates to increase employability, and the extent to which current studies of existing EOP courses have addressed these needs. The following research questions were thus developed:

- 1) What are the main research issues related to the identified needs of effective workplace communication? What gaps still exist in current research?
- 2) What communication competencies have been identified as important for graduate employability?

Methodology

According to Hallinger (2013), systematic literature reviews can help *point the way toward productive conceptualizations, topics and methodologies for subsequent research and enhance the quality of theoretical and empirical efforts of scholars to contribute to knowledge production* (p. 127). Thus, conducting a systematic literature review was necessary to explore the areas of research that have been conducted to inform further research to understand how HEIs can develop communication competence in the teaching and learning of EOP/ESP courses.

In conducting the review, the following steps were followed: (1) Formulation of research questions, (2) Identification of key words and examination of review according to key themes, (3) Selection of articles that adhere to the research criteria, (4) Assessment of articles and assortment into a database, and (5) Extraction of results into a synthesis in the final discussion (Briner & Denyer, 2012; Khan et al., 2003).

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Search strategy

According to Hallinger (2013), in conducting a systematic literature review, a researcher must ensure that the search methods adopted are *comprehensive, systematic and justifiable* (p. 133). However, there is no ideal number that can be coined as an ‘optimal’ number of studies that should be included in a review. The first step towards developing a search strategy concerns the variables that are addressed in a study’s research aims.

To determine the key terms to be included in the review, the examination of existing issues that have been identified in the literature is important. The scope of this study covers the role of HEIs to address English language communication competence to increase employability. To understand the communication competencies required, key terms such as ‘communication competence’ and ‘workplace communication’ were used. Also added as a key term was ‘needs’ as it may shed light on studies that have been done to determine the specific communication needs of employers as directed by the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025). We also include ‘English for Specific Purposes’ and ‘English for Occupational Purposes’ to determine the extent to which HEIs have also sought to address the issue. Therefore, the following key terms were used to identify relevant literature for the analysis:

Table 1: Search Keywords

First Keyword	Second Keyword	Third Keyword
‘workplace communication’ OR	‘needs’ OR ‘workplace needs’ OR	‘English for specific purposes’ OR
‘communication competence’ OR	‘workplace’	‘English for occupational purposes’ OR
‘English language’ OR		‘ESP’ OR
‘English communication’		‘EOP’

The online databases of Scopus, Web of Science and ScienceDirect were used to source the literature. From the initial search, 159 eligible articles were extracted and assessed, and after excluding irrelevant papers using the quality criteria, 133 were used for this systematic review due to their relevance to the topic.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria to select relevant literature to be included in a review are ideally informed by the review’s questions and objectives (Briner & Denyer, 2012), as this provides a scope through which the identified literature can then be examined. At times, the abstracts of the articles may provide sufficient information for the researchers to determine whether to include or exclude the study from the review, however, where information in the abstract is not sufficient, an examination of the full paper would then be required. In this study, the following criteria were used to determine the relevance of the papers for this review.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria
The research concerns studies done to uncover the English language needs of workplaces, or on graduates' readiness to enter the workplace.
The research papers are written in English.
The research papers are published between 2010 and 2021.
The research papers are journal articles or conference proceedings.
The full article of the publication is available.

Exclusion Criteria
The research relates specifically to intercultural communication competence needs, language needs for the disabled, or studies within the school setting.
The research papers are theses, dissertations, or book chapters.
The research does not meet other quality criteria of this research.

Regarding the selection of conference proceedings in this study, particular attention was paid to the quality criteria of the articles as noted in the next section. Conference proceedings in this study were recognised as a useful source of additional knowledge, especially to ensure that the review had explored published materials in depth. The conferences from which the proceedings originated were examined to ensure relevance to the areas of this study, with the number of times the articles have been cited, also noted.

Quality criteria

Apart from examining the selected papers based on the given inclusion and exclusion criteria, another criteria that may contribute towards a quality review is the process of ensuring that the papers meet certain quality standards to be included (Briner & Denyer, 2012). This requires a critical appraisal of each article to examine both the quality level of the study conducted as well as whether such studies should be included in the review or not. There are numerous checklists or considerations that a researcher may adopt, such as the guidelines below for qualitative research by Cohen and Crabtree (2008) and for quantitative by Briner and Denyer (2012):

Table 3: Quality Criteria

Qualitative Research (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008)	Quantitative Research (Briner & Denyer, 2012)
1. Research ethics	1. Clarity and basis of research questions and/or hypothesis
2. Theoretical and practical importance	2. Sample selection appropriateness
3. Clarity and coherence of the written report	3. Validity and reliability measures

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| 4. Appropriateness and rigour in methods adopted | 4. Appropriateness of research design |
| 5. Role of reflexivity or addressing of researcher bias | 5. Appropriateness of data analysis and inferences made |
| 6. Validity and credibility | |
| 7. Reliability measures | |
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While it was important for this review to exclude certain studies from the discussion that do not meet the quality criteria, notes were made in terms of the weaknesses of the studies, such as instances of lack of rigour, appropriateness of the research design selected, issues of validity and reliability, and more. This was to identify the potential gaps and areas of further research that may be appropriate for a further study in the field.

Characteristics of included studies

From the studies reviewed, a large number of research and needs analyses have been conducted to identify the needs of industry pertaining to English language communication skills required. The breakdown of the related studies is as explained below.

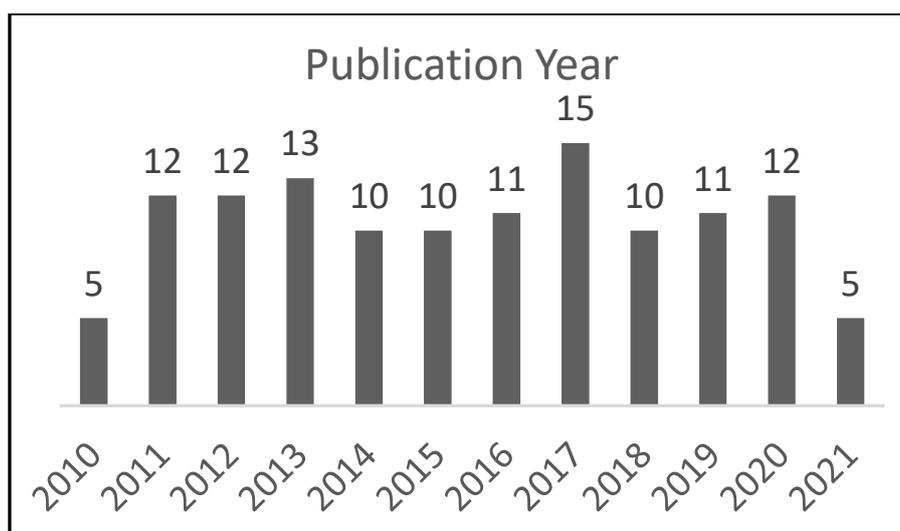


Figure 1: Publication Year

It is interesting to note that from 2010 to 2020, research interest seemed to fluctuate, however, the differences between the numbers of publications were not significant. The constant publications, however, demonstrate the continuous interest in understanding the English language communication needs of the industry.

Table 4: Countries

Country	Number of Relevant Publications	Country	Number of Relevant Publications
Malaysia	30	USA	2
Hong Kong	10	Bahrain	1
Australia	8	Bangladesh	1
Iran	7	Canada	1
Romania	5	Czech Republic	1
Saudi Arabia	5	Dubai	1
Taiwan	5	Finland	1
Thailand	5	Mexico	1
Indonesia	4	Netherlands	1
Pakistan	3	Oman	1
Turkey	3	Qatar	1
China	2	South Africa	1
Greece	2	Sri Lanka	1
New Zealand	2	Ukraine	1
Russia	2		

From the publications extracted, interestingly, Malaysia had the highest number of relevant publications, demonstrating the crucial nature of the study as HEIs work to meet the standards set by the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025). With the exception of Australia, most studies also focused on countries where English is learned as a second or foreign language. However, in the case of Australia, a number of studies focused on the needs of non-native speakers of English who are working in the country.

A further examination of these studies showed a trend in the samples that were collected. Specifically, the most common samples were from undergraduate students, academics/instructors, industry representatives, alumni, and experts (the latter two being the least common in past studies). The actual breakdown of the study samples is shown in Table 2.

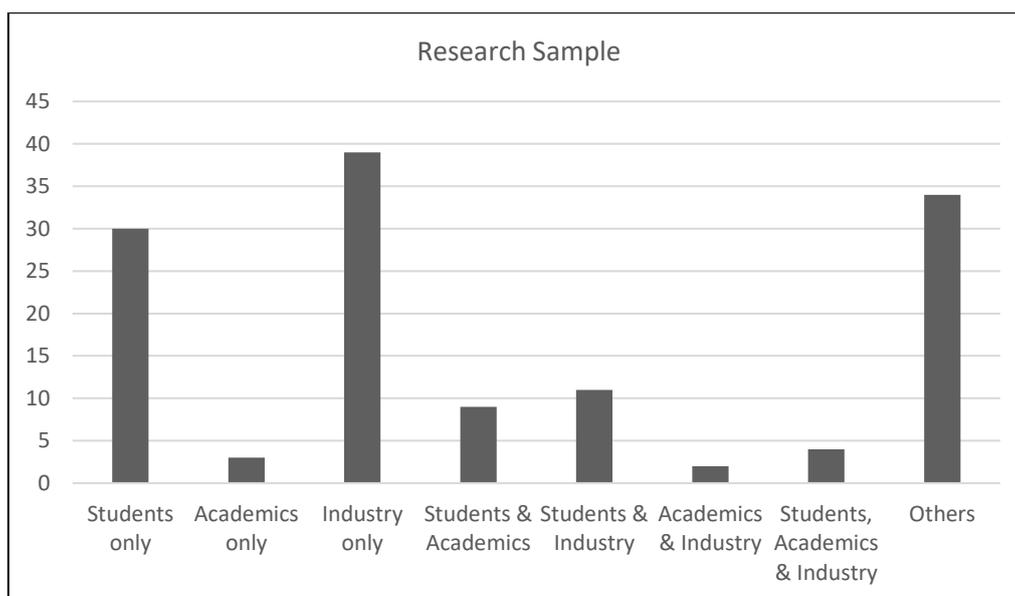


Figure 2: Research Sample

Interestingly, the highest number of research focused on obtaining perspectives from industry practitioners only, or undergraduates only. Very few studies have attempted to triangulate the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, which is a practice and requirement that has been agreed upon by many needs analysis scholars (Brown, 2016; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). It is concerning, therefore, to find that this practice is not commonly reflected in current research.

Table 5: Research Areas

Research Areas	Number of Studies
Perceptions of English language needs	72 studies
Uses of English in the workplace	17 studies
Designing, developing and/or validating ESP courses, materials and/or assessments based on workplace needs	33 studies
Comparison between ESP courses, materials and/or assessments with workplace practices	5 studies
Perception of current English language performance and capabilities	6 studies

From Table 5 above, most studies that have been done in the area relate to the perceptions of English language proficiency and competency needs for the workplace, followed by efforts that have been done to design, develop, and/or validate ESP courses based on identified needs. It should be noted that a number of the articles extracted had overlaps between the research areas, however, due to the interest of this study in examining the perceptions of language needs, articles with more than one research area are categorised under the first area (Perceptions of English language needs) for analysis purposes.

When examined further, only the first and second research areas in Table 5 seemed to be the most relevant to provide an understanding of the communication needs of workplaces. The next section discusses the results of the analysis of these two research areas.

Results and discussion

From the analysis conducted, the studies were done in various contexts, including maritime (Ahmmed et al., 2020; Alibakhshi & Labbafi, 2021), engineering (Adnan, 2019; Baklazhenko, 2018; Gözüyeşil, 2014; Masduki & Zakaria, 2020; Panyawong-Ngam et al., 2015; Spence & Liu, 2013), medicine (Arumugam & Kaur, 2011), mechatronics (Ranasuriya & Herath, 2020), pest control (Hee & Zainal, 2018), human resource (Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012), information technology (Fareen, 2018), military and/or aviation (Alshabeb et al., 2017; Sari & Sari, 2020), architecture (Paea et al., 2012) and a combination of multiple industries (Al-Buainain, 2011).

The figure below shows the types of research methods that have been conducted to identify the English communication needs of the workplace. A number of studies examined the needs, wants and lacks of language using the model of Hutchinson and Waters (1987) (Arumugam & Kaur, 2011; Liu et al., 2011; Sari & Sari, 2020) as well as Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) (Alshabeb et al., 2017; Arumugam & Kaur, 2011; Hee & Zainal, 2018). However, it should be noted also that the majority of the research analysed did not even mention a guiding needs analysis method in their report.

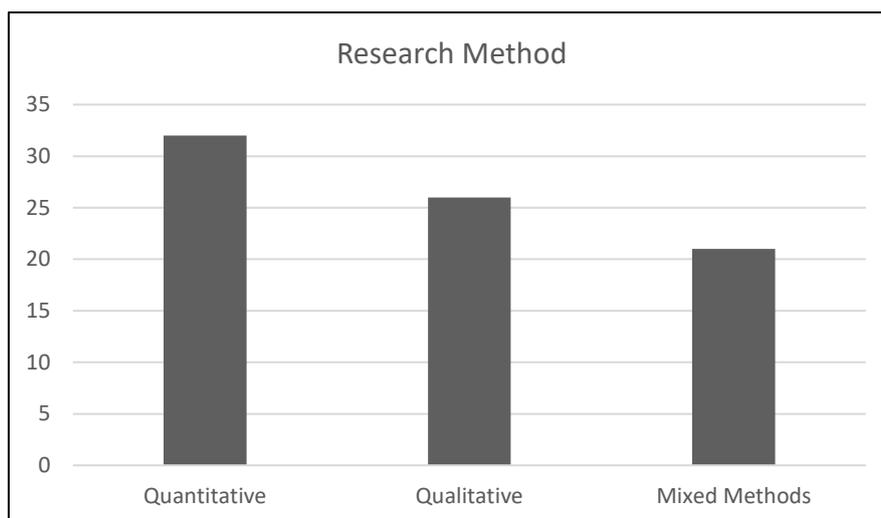


Figure 3: Research Methods

In terms of the research method adopted, the number of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches adopted did not vary significantly. However, where quality considerations are concerned (Briner & Denyer, 2012), there were very little justifications given for the reason of choosing one design over another. Additionally, for quantitative studies, most of the instruments adopted or adapted were based on an existing instrument or model that has been constructed for that particular field. For instance, the study by Ahmmed et al. (2020) that examined the language needs of the maritime industry was partially based on a questionnaire that was developed from existing literature and the Maritime English Model Course 3.17. Similarly, one questionnaire used by Gözüyeşil (2014) was adapted by a needs analysis questionnaire used by the University of Auckland, New Zealand, for non-English background students. Paea et al. (2012), in contrast, drafted their questionnaire from researching international curricula and peers' professional experience. Alibakhshi and Labbafi (2021),

on the other hand, developed an instrument through qualitative interviews to extract the appropriate task-based learning needs.

For many of the instruments, a list of tasks (e.g. writing reports, giving presentations, answering inquiries, etc.) for each language skill was given, and the participants were asked to indicate which of the tasks they most frequently use in the workplace. However, this raises several questions. Firstly, with regards to instruments that were self-developed, where did the list of tasks originate from? Is there a possibility that some tasks were not included in the instrument? Also, there is a limitation whereby most instruments focused on the communicative tasks that need to be performed, but did not examine what competence looks like when conducting the tasks. Such research seemed to overlook the crucial issue of overall *communicative ability*, which is reflected through the pragmatic use of language in both oral and written communicative events (Kaburise, 2016).

Most important communication skills

In examining the individual skills required, many claim that the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) are equally important (Adnan, 2019; Alshabeb et al., 2017; Arumugam & Kaur, 2011; Ranasuriya & Herath, 2020). Others reported the perception that productive skills (speaking and writing) are the most essential for business communication (Baklazhenko, 2018; Fareen, 2018; Singh & Raja Harun, 2020). However, there are also others who believe that writing is the most common skill practiced in the workplace (Spence & Liu, 2013), yet some posit that speaking skills are the most needed skill (Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012), as it is also the skill that is tested the most among recruiting agencies (Ahmmed et al., 2020). Panyawong-Ngam et al. (2015), on the other hand, considered listening as the most important skill, followed by writing and reading. One study identified speaking, writing, interpersonal and visual communication as the most important skills for the workplace in the context of civil engineering (Masduki & Zakaria, 2020).

One quantitative study conducted by Al-Buainain (2011) that examined the use of English involving 644 respondents across various industries, claimed that speaking was the most used skill in the workplace. However, the same study also emphasised that the skills should not be examined in isolation as a correlation analysis of the different skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening and translation) showed that all skills positively correlate with each other. From the analysis, however, reading-writing and listening-speaking had the highest linear correlation compared to the other pairs. While some jobs/industries were found to have significant differences in the extent of English used as well as the skills needed, Al-Buainain (2011) stressed that it remains unclear whether this reflects the use of English as determined by the job, or if it only reflects the nature of the materials used. He also maintained that the results do not reflect actual use, but rather discusses frequency of use, illustrating an area of research that could be further examined through an analysis of the use of English in different industries.

This argument by Al-Buainain (2011) supports the theoretical discussion of Chastain (1998) who noted that communicative performance consists of both the receptive and productive skills. According to Chastain (1998), a logical assumption is that the receptive skills (listening and reading) precede the productive skills (speaking and writing) in the language learning process. Davies (1982) supports this view in his discussion of fluency, where he claims that fluency is essential in receptive skills but are merely desirable in productive skills. In any case, the measurement of language ability has long been a major issue in curriculum and language studies (Attan et al., 2013), and according to Bachman (1990), any attempt to measure an ability must first be premised by an understanding of the skill to be measured, and how exactly to measure it.

It should also be noted that there are various interpretations to how observations and ability can be measured, due to the numerous views of communicative competence that also exist (Attan et al.,

2013). For instance, the extensive study conducted by Ahmad Tajuddin and Abdul Hamid (2017) found that it is pertinent for graduates to not only have skills in interpersonal communication, presentation, speaking, listening, writing and non-verbal communication, but that they should also have competence in content knowledge, culture, linguistics, critical thinking and tasking skills as well. She mentioned the importance of knowing the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of communication. Nevertheless, despite the majority consensus that all four skills are important in the workplace, this study found that higher focus was given in elaborating the needs of writing skills and speaking skills compared to reading and listening. The findings are presented in the subsequent sections.

Needs of writing skills

In terms of writing skills that have been identified by past studies, the following table lists the six most common tasks that graduates are expected to perform when they enter the workplace.

Table 6: Most Common Writing Communicative Tasks

Communicative Tasks	Researchers
Writing emails	(Adnan, 2019; Ahmmed et al., 2020; Chan, 2014; Fareen, 2018; Hee & Zainal, 2018; Masduki & Zakaria, 2020; Ranasuriya & Herath, 2020; Spence & Liu, 2013; Thomas et al., 2016)
Writing reports	(Ahmmed et al., 2020; Alshabeb et al., 2017; Chan, 2014; Fareen, 2018; Masduki & Zakaria, 2020; Singh & Raja Harun, 2020; Spence & Liu, 2013)
Writing business letters	(Fareen, 2018; Spence & Liu, 2013)
Writing proposals	(Spence & Liu, 2013; Thomas et al., 2016)
Writing memos	(Alshabeb et al., 2017; Ranasuriya & Herath, 2020; Spence & Liu, 2013)
Preparing presentation slides	(Spence & Liu, 2013; Thomas et al., 2016)

One study that examined the competence level required for writing tasks was conducted by Attan et al. (2013), who provided written scripts to industry practitioners to obtain their feedback regarding the written quality of the scripts. Based on a scale rating of ‘1 = Extremely Limited Writer’ to ‘6 = Effective Writer’, the study found that the respondents believed a ‘3 = Functional Writer’ could satisfactorily meet the workplace requirements if given extra assistance and time to learn in the workplace. Interestingly, some also shared that greater emphasis should be placed on knowledge of the topic and critical thinking skills over language proficiency. Attan et al. (2013) found two major categories to measure graduating students’ written assessment competence, which are: (1) contribution to task (comprising knowledge of topic; maturity of thought, problem solving, and analysis of topic), and (2) language and organisation (comprising of planning, effective linking, accurate language, variety of sentences, and varied vocabulary).

Needs of speaking skills

Studies have also been conducted to identify the speaking skills needed in the workplace. As with writing skills, speaking skills have also been examined based on the tasks that need to be performed.

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The table below lists the six most common speaking tasks that graduates are expected to perform in the workplace.

Table 7: Most Common Speaking Communicative Tasks

Communicative Tasks	Researchers
Giving oral presentations	(Adnan, 2019; Belwal et al., 2017; Gözüyeşil, 2014; Hee & Zainal, 2018; Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012; Ranasuriya & Herath, 2020; Spence & Liu, 2013)
Attending meetings and seminars	(Hee & Zainal, 2018; Singh & Raja Harun, 2020; Spence & Liu, 2013)
Communicating with customers or clients	(Hee & Zainal, 2018; Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012; Spence & Liu, 2013; Thomas et al., 2016)
Handling telephone calls	(Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012; Singh & Raja Harun, 2020; Spence & Liu, 2013)
Giving and receiving instructions	(Masduki & Zakaria, 2020; Sari & Sari, 2020; Singh & Raja Harun, 2020)
Participating in social conversations	(Masduki & Zakaria, 2020; Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012; Sari & Sari, 2020; Singh et al., 2014; Spence & Liu, 2013; Yao & Du-Babcock, 2020)

In terms of spoken competency, Fareen (2018) found that there is a need for prospective employees to develop competencies in discussing, persuading, convincing and negotiating in English. Rapport building was also highlighted as a valuable skill, as well as the ability to recognise when to be concise and when to be detailed when communicating. In the context of China, Yao and Du-Babcock (2020) found social talk to be an important aspect of spoken communication. However, it should also be noted that very few studies attempted to identify the actual competencies needed to develop effective speaking skills, whether for oral presentations or for interpersonal relations.

Identified challenges

In terms of challenges in using the English language, studies have found that graduates face challenges in sustaining conversations (Alshabeb et al., 2017; Arumugam & Kaur, 2011), comprehending and answering questions (Arumugam & Kaur, 2011), giving instructions (Arumugam & Kaur, 2011), organising ideas (Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012), explaining logically (Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012) and paraphrasing (Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012). Some studies also found that respondents feel a lack of vocabulary is a challenge (Gözüyeşil, 2014) especially for spoken language (Adnan, 2019; Alshabeb et al., 2017; Sari & Sari, 2020), and some reported spelling mistakes (Fareen, 2018), inaccurate grammar use (Sari & Sari, 2020) and pronunciation issues (Fareen, 2018; Sari & Sari, 2020) as issues to be solved. Interestingly, a study by Chan (2014) also found writing negative messages to be a particularly challenging task for written communication.

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Discussion

From the analysis of the review of studies conducted, it is clear that much research has been conducted to determine the communicative tasks and events that fresh graduates and employees need to conduct in the workplace. Some studies were conducted with a specific context in mind such as for nurses, medical assistants, engineers, pilots, and others, while some looked at the workplace across industries to determine the most common needs.

For the latter, it seemed that there is a general consensus of common communicative tasks in both speaking and writing that are used in the workplace. However, little has been elaborated on ways to determine and differentiate levels of competence in performing such tasks. This raises an issue whereby knowing what tasks need to be performed does not translate into understanding what may be required to perform the task *well*. We noticed that very few studies took this step further to look beyond the communicative tasks into the *competencies* needed to effectively complete such tasks. This was also raised by Thomas et al. (2016) who posit that while employers often request for high levels of English, the exact measurements to this request remains vague. At the theoretical level, this way of viewing communication skills based on the communicative tasks within communication functions (Savignon, 1972; Van Ek, 1976) has been criticised by Canale and Swain (1980), as it neglects issues such as appropriateness and does not provide any description of the rules of language use.

Thus, based on the analysis in this study, the following gaps in current research have been identified:

1. Firstly, more studies need to be conducted that triangulate the perspectives of different stakeholders where needs analysis on English language skills is concerned. This supports the views of various needs analysis experts who emphasise the importance of uncovering different perspectives such as from learners, employers and educators to identify the most pertinent needs of ESL (Brown, 2016; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).
2. Next, future studies could look at *how* certain communicative tasks should be conducted, rather than focus on *what* communicative tasks are commonly performed in the workplace. This would provide a better perspective of the competencies required to meet the communicative needs of the industry.
3. Following this, one area of study that could be further explored is in developing relevant modules or learning tools that can increase students' communicative competence to make them more employable.

To sum, based on the review conducted, much research could still be undertaken locally and internationally to determine the competencies required for professional communication for graduate employability. A holistic study that not only looks at different stakeholders' viewpoints, but also different aspects of competence, could further inform how communication competence can improve graduates' employability when entering the workplace. It is evident from the current analysis, that research to date has only touched on the surface of what seems to be a very pressing concern not just in Malaysia, but also internationally, suggesting that deeper research into the area is warranted. These findings also resonate with a few other published articles, such as by Chan (2014), who discusses the nature and variety of English used in the workplace and the intertextual nature of workplace texts as important issues to be studied further.

Where the study of communicative competencies is concerned, Davies (1980) who examined studies of adolescent and adult second language learners, posits that receptive skills should be emphasised at the early stages of introductory classes, but that productive skills should not. Additionally, Bhattacharyya (2018) argues that effective communication constitutes the use of adequate structures, discourse and rhetorical features apart from just language abilities, which suggests the need to

examine the productive skills, which are speaking and writing, especially for higher education which serves as the last institution before students enter the workforce to become employees.

As a result of the findings of this study, a framework is proposed for future needs analysis studies that focus on determining the communicative competencies needed for graduate employability, particularly for tertiary education. The framework is primarily concerned with the productive skills on the premise that the learners will have developed listening and reading fluency at the primary and secondary levels of education by the time they enter tertiary education. Of course, we also recognise that this is often untrue, as evidenced by the observation by Chastain (1998) who argued that second language learners often do not acquire the receptive skills necessary to function in a second-language communicative situation. Yet, as argued by Chastain (1998), Davies (1980) and Davies (1982), this is more pertinent in early education than in higher education, especially for countries like Malaysia where students have obtained eleven years of formal English language education before entering university.

Proposed conceptual framework

There have been numerous communicative competency models proposed in the past, such as by Hymes (1972), Munby (1978), and Canale and Swain (1980). The model of Canale and Swain (1980) sought to examine three main competencies, which are (1) 'grammatical competence', referring to *knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology* (p. 29); (2) 'sociolinguistic competence', which refers to sociocultural rules of use that examined appropriateness as well as rules of discourse; and (3) 'strategic competence', which refers to the verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that are adopted to compensate for breakdowns in communication. Later on, Canale (1983) made a further distinction between sociolinguistic competence and a new competence that he called 'discourse competence', which refers to *mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres* (p. 9). It is this competence model that is adopted in designing the proposed conceptual framework below.

Based on the review, much research has focused, in part, on discourse competence by looking at the communicative tasks to be performed, and slightly on sociolinguistic competence by looking at some common communicative events that fresh graduates will encounter in the workplace. Thus, to develop overall pragmatic competence in communicating in the workplace, the following framework is proposed:

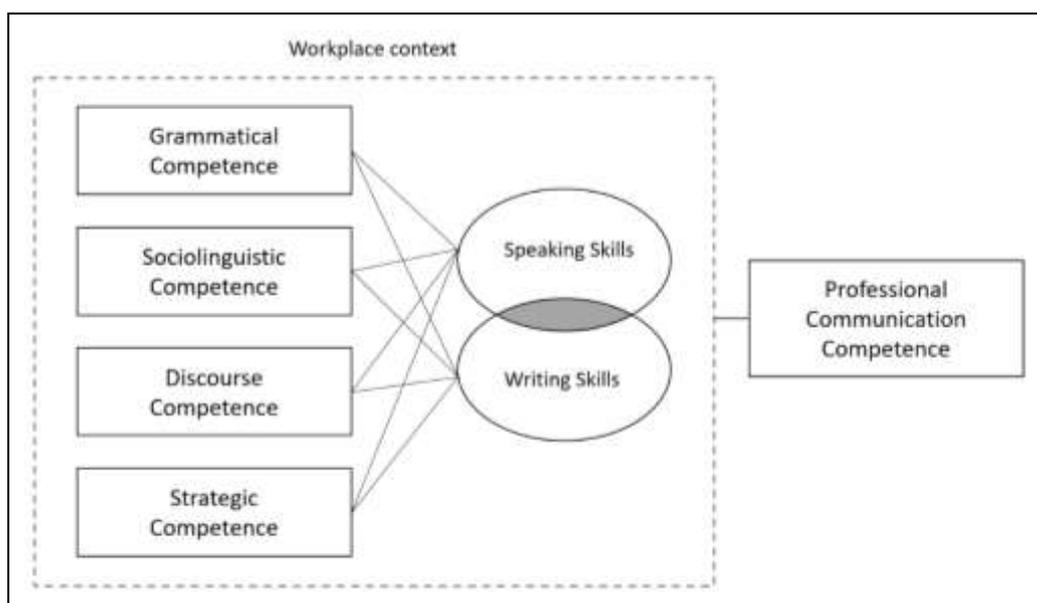


Figure 4: Conceptual Framework (based on Canale, 1983)

The framework in Figure 4 sits within the context of the workplace. According to Knapp et al. (2017), language, both written and spoken, are central to any kind of work applied in the business context, as similarly claimed by Kaburise (2016). Thus, speaking skills and writing skills are the focus behind developing professional communication competence according to this framework. Also, consideration should be given to the area where speaking and writing overlap, such as in writing emails or when conducting verbal reporting, as highlighted by Knapp et al. (2017) and Chan (2014). Thus, the written skills, spoken skills and the overlapping skills between these two will need to be examined based on the needs for grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence in the workplace setting as a proposed framework to develop professional communication competence for fresh graduates upon entering the workforce.

Conclusions and implications

The systematic literature review conducted has shed light on several important findings. Firstly, there remains numerous areas of research that could be conducted. Specifically, future research can focus beyond the language tasks of the workplace and pay more attention on especially the competence level required to execute such tasks well as a way to inform future language and communication curriculum design for higher education. Next, more research needs to be conducted that triangulates findings between different stakeholder needs, such as between industry representatives, alumni, experts, and academics. Also, merely identifying the tasks and competencies required may not shed light on the validity of the materials or assessments designed; thus, another research area would be to look into the validity of such materials in light of the needs of the various stakeholders.

This review has several implications. Firstly, for the context of Malaysia specifically, the review clearly shows the extent to which this topic has garnered research interest, which reflects local HEIs constant efforts to meet the standards set by the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) and the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (2017) to increase students' English communicative abilities and achieve higher employability in the country. Practically, the review also sheds light on the gaps that exist in current research that can be addressed in future research. For HEIs working to design and develop courses in ESP and EOP to improve communication skills for employability, the findings of this review may also be useful to examine the scope of writing and speaking communicative tasks that have been identified by past studies.

This review was not without its limitations. Firstly, the articles retrieved only came from a search of online databases and did not, for instance, employ other search methods such as extracting articles from the reference lists of the original articles. This was emphasised by Briner and Denyer (2012), who posited that arguably, the most ideal review would include all studies and data relevant to the research question, including even unpublished and grey literature. Thus, there is room for improvement to further extend this review by incorporating those sources in a future study.

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