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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the words and phrases used by student graduates in job interviews. Twenty-Seven Malaysian graduates participated in the study. “How to face challenges” was the focal theme chosen for analysis of the data. The findings indicated that successful interviewees covered six out of seven important employability skills, while interviewees on the reserve list covered only four of the employability skills, and the unsuccessful interviewees covered only three of the seven skills. Successful interviewees were deemed able to portray high level proficiency by using the most salient words and phrases to express their employability skills in the interviews. It is expected that this study will encourage current undergraduates to develop high level language proficiency regarding their employability and foster training in this area by educational institutions so as to benefit their students.

Keywords

Employability skills, job interviews, graduates, words, phrases

Surveys on the employability of Malaysian graduates reported that 64% of employer respondents mentioned low English language proficiency of graduates (Mustafa, 2018). See Figure 1. The most frequently

asked interview question was, “Why do you think you could do well in this job?”. This question required a specific answer from applicants, one that did not contain generic answers, such as “I am a hardworking

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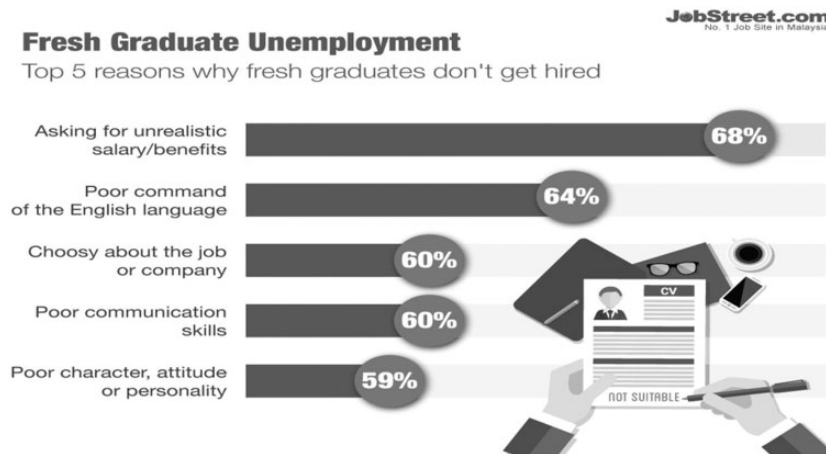


Figure 1. Top five reasons why graduates do not get hired (Source: JobStreet.com).

person”. Most of the graduates did not provide specific answers; thus, were not shortlisted. This shortcoming indicated a lack of language proficiency as applicants were unable to use appropriate words and phrases to answer important interview questions (Edmund, 2015; Mustafa, 2018). The failure of many graduates to be gainfully employed disadvantages them and adversely affects the national economy and needs to be addressed (Archer & Davison, 2008; Kenayathulla et al., 2019; Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2014). This study contributes to this area by examining the language proficiency expressed by graduates in their job interviews and whether this relates to being employed.

From Figure 1, a poor command of the English language was rated as the second most important reason (64%), which is consistent with studies by Singh and Singh (2008), Singh (2018) and Ishak (2018). The top two reasons for unemployment were also consistent with research conducted by Zahiid (2015) and Bernama (2016, 2018). Poor language skills has also attracted the attention of the Minister for Higher Education, who remarked that over 50% of graduates had poor language proficiency and were unable to conduct meaningful interactions in English (MHEM, 2014). Other researchers, such as Edmund (2015) and Karim (2016), also noted that poor language proficiency was a barrier to employment, and reports revealed that over 40,000 Malaysian graduates from public universities could not secure jobs in the private sector because of language problems (Davies et al., 2020; Mustafa, 2018; Rasul et al., 2010). Davies et al. (2020) and Krishnan et al. (2020) suggested there was a real need to establish a standard of proficiency for fresh graduates who were seeking to enter the Malaysian workforce.

Employability skills

Yorke and Knight (2004) defined employability skills as “a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely

to gain employment and be successful in their chosen careers” (p. 32). According to Jackson (2010), employability skills consist of two types, namely generic or common employability, and global employability skills. Common employability skills consist of problem solving, leadership, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, adaptability, teamwork, and personal qualities. Global employability skills consist of organisational resource management, technology use, mental capacity, physical space, multi-racial awareness, analytical skills, and valuing diversity and difference. These skills are typically evaluated by using standard interview questions based on topics such as how graduates would handle problems related to stress and strengths and weaknesses. For global employability skills, graduates would be asked questions on topics such as how interviewees handle difficult situations, how they react to mistakes, and how they would deal with supervisors who make poor decisions.

Proficiency in employability skills

Language proficiency is thus an important skill required in a job interview and in the workplace. A recent survey showed that if employers “require an employee with good proficiency, they will employ a native speaker of that language who possesses high proficiency...” (Canning, 2009, p. 12). In some interviews, the focus is on speech forms and presentation style. Therefore, proficiency demonstrates interviewees’ depth of ability in the language, which can lead to successful outcomes from interviews.

In job interviews, proficiency is either “appropriate” or “inappropriate”. Inappropriate language is filled with intensifiers, hesitations, hedges, poor choice of words, and hyper-correct forms (Sabrena et al., 2013). Appropriate words, on the other hand, draw high marks for suitability, but not for social attractiveness. Inappropriate expressions such as hesitations and discourse markers like “uh”, “like”, “well”, and “you

know” have no particular meaning. Avoiding such disfluencies and poor word choice is important as performing well with high level proficiency in a job interview can create a positive impact on employers.

Past studies on employability skills

Several studies have examined employability skills. An early study by Jackson (2010) was conducted on an international scale and based on industry-relevant competencies and skills among modern graduates. This author found that specific interview questions like “How do you face challenges?” would be suitable to evaluate the employability skills of fresh graduates. Jackson’s findings are supported by a study conducted by Mohan et al. (2018), which evaluated the same employability skills in job interviews among fresh graduates for senior positions.

Several studies have been conducted using interview evaluation documents taken from organisations, as revealed by Altonji and Pierret (2001), Ngah et al. (2011), Ahmad et al. (2017), Rahmat et al. (2015), Islam and Shukri (2013), Mohamad et al. (2013), and Sabrena et al. (2013). Many organisations have also measured employability skills by using job interview documents in their analyses (Azmi et al., 2018). Tanius et al. (2019) used a rating scale for their interview documents. This had seven categories: outstanding, competent, excellent, average, below average, poor, not applicable, and unable to determine. Other research has validated these ratings (Azmi et al., 2018).

Studies by Ngah et al. (2011), Rasul et al. (2013), and Azmi et al. (2018) found that utterances in terms of words and phrases were significant in evaluating employability skills. Rasul et al. (2013) and Hamid et al. (2014) showed that the use of suitable words and phrases indicated an interviewee’s high proficiency. Last, several studies found that human resource managers preferred evaluating fresh graduates with good language skills (Chynoweth, 2012; Hamid et al., 2014; Krishnan et al., 2017, 2019).

Several studies have been conducted on employability skills in Malaysia. Sapaat et al. (2011) conducted a study on graduates’ employability and found that most graduates were unemployed because

they lacked employability skills like language proficiency, interpersonal communication skills, general knowledge, and critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Moslehifar and Ibrahim (2012) investigated the need for oral communication among undergraduates and found that it played an important role in problem solving in the interview.

The art of answering questions by the applicants during job interviews demonstrates the applicants’ language proficiency and contributes to the evaluation of employability skills (Cheong et al., 2016; Perlag & Zainuddin 2019; Rahmat et al., 2015; Yoong et al., 2016). Based on evidence from numerous studies that have been conducted locally and abroad, it can be said that language proficiency manifests as an important factor of employability skills (cf. Ahmad et al., 2017; Azmi et al., 2018; Islam & Shukri, 2013).

Employability skills and theoretical framework

Packianathan and Narayanan (2014) found that employability skills and the systems theory framework (STF) were interlinked. The STF approach proposes that career and career skills development are dependent on multiple influences ranging from global effects to personal characteristics. As Packianathan and Narayanan (2014) noted, individuals have personal characteristics, such as values, traits, belief, and thoughts, and these are influenced by the context of the job interview. Figure 2 displays a model for how words and phrases used in job interviews for the evaluation of employability skills can be integrated with the STF to rank job interviewees (Rasul et al., 2013). This STF approach is supported by studies by Benjamin and O’Reilly (2011), Bhatia and Hynes (1996), McMahan et al. (2004), McMahan et al. (2005), and Rizvi et al. (2013), who showed that employability skills can be integrated with theory based on the objectives of the study.

In the current study, the question “How do you face challenges?” (Brownell & Chung, 2001; Jackson, 2010; Mohan et al., 2018) was used to guide an examination of the words and phrases that indicate proficiency in an interview and are attributed

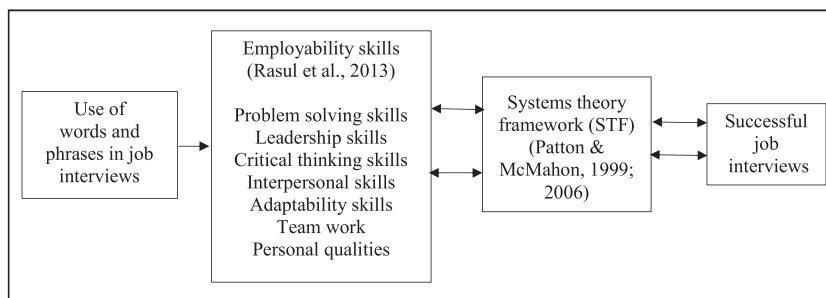


Figure 2. STS framework on employability skills.

Table 1. Useful standard words and phrases for the listed employability skills.

Employability skills	Definitions	Sample words or phrases	Sources
Problem solving	Refers to mental skills such as solving problems, organising, associating, contrasting, evaluating, selecting.	e.g. evaluating, analysing, follow up, monitor, conflicts, handling stress.	Van Der Heijde (2006); Abd Majid et al. (2020)
Leadership	Refers to thoughtful decision making about the organisation, appropriate delegation and allocating of resources.	e.g. efficient, effective, goal oriented, motivating, negotiation skills, planning, organising, tact.	Spielhofe and Walker (2008); Hansen (2010)
Critical thinking	Refers to capacity to make decision in complex situations.	e.g. empathy, ability to understand, reason, make judgments	Jackson (2010); Kenayathulla et al. (2019)
Interpersonal	Refers to interaction skills in business domain, the ability to get along with others, listening, attitude, manner, reliability.	e.g. applied knowledge, interaction, integrity, self-motivation, mature	Hamid et al. (2014)
Adaptability	Refers to capacity to adjust to suit the environment or situation.	e.g. flexible, willing, accept changes/new environment, accept new ideas	Matthew and Nanette (2007); Deloitte (2010); Kenayathulla et al. (2019)
Teamwork	Refers to capacity to work cohesively with others on common goals, create positive working environment, give support.	e.g. project, working with the same notions, in a group with the same thoughts	Spielhofe and Walker; (2008); Jackson (2010)
Personal qualities	Refers to portrayal of qualities suitable for the workplace; e.g., dependability and patience.	e.g., meet deadline, lifelong learning, personal development, professionalism, self-awareness, realisation	Spielhofe and Walker (2008); Jackson (2010)

to employability skills (cf. Rasul et al., 2013). Table 1 reports a list of useful words and phrases that correspond with employability skills.

Method

Setting

The study was conducted in a prominent organisation in Malaysia's capital city, Kuala Lumpur, which has been providing services to food organisations for almost a decade.

Sample

A total of 27 participants aged 23 to 25 years were chosen for the study. They were new graduates, who had obtained bachelors' degrees in various fields, such as marketing, management, business administration, economics, and hotel management.

Data collection and analysis procedures

The study utilised a qualitative method of analysis (Creswell, 2018). The job interview sessions were recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed. The verification process for the transcriptions and coding was conducted by three experts with backgrounds in human resource management (specialising in job interviews) and three post-doctoral

researchers in the languages and linguistics field. Each had more than 25 years of work experience. The data analysis was based on the theme of challenges that employers encountered when recruiting new employees. This theme allowed the interviewer to evaluate the interviewees' employability skills in job interviews. For the purpose of the study, only selected utterances were used for the analysis, as recommended by Li (2002) and Wodak (2013). They further noted that for data collected from real settings, even one sample of an utterance is valid for analysis.

Results and analysis

The study observed employability skills based on standard interview questions used in job interviews, around the "How do you face challenges?" concept (Brownell & Chung, 2001). This concept is used to discuss interviewees' suitability when evaluating their employability skills for proficiency (cf. Rasul et al., 2013). The findings are presented based on ratings of "successful", "reserved", and "unsuccessful" interviewees.

Successful interviewees

The first extract provides examples of taken from successful interviewees.

Problem solving	IE15	<i>... the main challenge was communication ... the planning stage clashed with semester break when all of my teammates went back to their hometown and ... face-to-face communication ... did not work out as expected and after ... I held meetings every week to effectively communicate every matter</i>
Leadership	IE15	<i>... constantly reminding my committees on the importance and objectives of the event were my strategy to boost their motivation towards achieving the ultimate goal</i>
Interpersonal	IE15	<i>I held meetings every week to effectively communicate every matter</i>
Adaptability	IE18	<i>... willingness and enthusiasm to adapt to change ... flexibility</i>
Teamwork	IE12	<i>... difficult ... communication between team members ... [it was a] team project ... and my colleagues and I ... [were] involved group conversations</i>
Personal qualities	IE18	<i>... take pride in my work while open to healthy criticism and taking every opportunity for training classes offered by the corporation</i>
	IE12	<i>... pressure is very important to me ... good pressure ... such as having a lot of assignments to work on ... or an upcoming deadline ... helps me to stay motivated and productive</i>

In this analysis, interviewee IE15 encountered problems in her project and tried to find solutions to the situation. Even after the first method did not work, she persevered so that the project could be accomplished. IE15 expressed that she was capable of analysing a situation and could solve the problems. As for leadership skills, IE15 indicated that she constantly reminded her committee members of the importance and objectives of the event. At the same time, she was able to boost the committee's motivation in order to achieve its goals. The interviewer saw that IE15 had the ability to motivate and inspire her colleagues, which showed that she was capable of taking charge of a group. IE15 also demonstrated that she was able to communicate appropriately and directly.

It was evident that IE18 demonstrated adaptability skills and personal qualities as she could handle the challenges she was facing by being willing to adapt to change and explore opportunities. Similarly, IE12 also displayed personal qualities that she had the

ability to face problems at the workplace. She was able to stay positive despite the problems that occurred, which is a quality needed in the workplace, as problems could occur at any time and pressure is unavoidable.

IE12 showed teamwork abilities as she was working on a project with her colleagues and could find solutions to their problems. At the same time, IE12 demonstrated that group interactions were involved in the decision-making process and that she was able to work in a team to achieve mutual goals. The answers demonstrated that she wanted to learn new skills and develop herself, even though it might not be within the scope of her job description.

Reserved interviewees

Problem Solving	IE7	<i>... this is a super good question sir ... it is a good way to resolve</i>
Interpersonal	IE5	<i>Well ... I know, but ... I can carry out a good conversation ... however ...</i>
Adaptability	IE11	<i>... I think I can take up any jobs to work in this company sir ...</i>
Personal qualities	IE6	<i>customer always right even though they do mistakes</i>

IE7 depicted his ability to handle stress in a way that demonstrated his ability to solve problems under stressful situations. The answer from IE5 was confident, and the response from IE11 revealed her ability to interact as she had the ability and flexibility to adapt to the situation. IE6 showed her awareness of the business culture and demonstrated she was aware of the circumstances she could encounter in her job.

Unsuccessful interviewees

Problem Solving	IE23	<i>... generally ... solved in a dignity manner ... find an amicable solution ... sure can</i>
Interpersonal	IE19	<i>... mmm ... miscommunication between me and the parents but it was solved by talking to the manager and asking him what he thinks ... yes</i>
Personal qualities	IE23	<i>... generally ... facing problems is common ... but ...</i>

IE23 depicted how she could solve problems by having meetings to get ideas from experts to find solutions in an amicable manner. From her answers, it can be understood IE23 had ideas on how to solve problems but did not demonstrate how she would tackle situations in order to solve the problems.

IE19 demonstrated that in order to solve a problem, he would ask his manager for his opinions. This action shows that he had the ability to interact well with his colleagues at the workplace. IE23 answered that facing problems is common, which demonstrated he was aware that new problems arise every day and managed to demonstrate his maturity in thinking by saying that a problem could be solved in a dignified manner through discussions with a superior who could make the decision.

The results revealed that the successful interviewees demonstrated six employability skills, namely, problem-solving, leadership, interpersonal, adaptability, teamwork, and personal qualities. However, the reserved interviewees depicted four employability skills (i.e., problem-solving, interpersonal, adaptability, and personal qualities), and the unsuccessful interviewees displayed three, namely, problem-solving, interpersonal, and personal qualities. Table 2 shows the employability skills revealed by the successful, reserved and unsuccessful interviewees based on the employability skills listed by Rasul et al. (2013).

Table 2 provides additional samples of the employability skills that indicate interviewees' proficiency (cf. Deloitte, 2010; Hamid et al., 2014; Jackson, 2010).

The useful words and phrases that were elicited from the question "How do you face challenges?" showed that reserved and unsuccessful interviewees were poorer in proficiency compared to the successful interviewees, based on the six employability skills listed by Rasul et al. (2013), which is consistent with Jackson (2010), Mohan et al. (2018), and Abd Majid et al., (2020).

In conclusion, the findings generally revealed that the successful interviewees were more successful in showing proficiency that demonstrated their confidence in the job interviews compared to the reserved and unsuccessful interviewees. The successful interviewees also managed to respond to interview questions by answering fuller aspects of the questions.

Implications

This research suggests that employability skills course modules should be implemented or revamped based on the current market needs related to employment, and these modules should contain specific learning objectives as core subjects. The course modules could be interwoven with underlying employability skills, such as effective communication, creative and

Table 2. Employability skills uttered by successful, reserved, and unsuccessful interviewees.

Interviewees	Skills	Words or phrases
Successful	Problem-solving	Prevents me from feeling stressed; helps me to stay motivated and productive; avoided unnecessary stress; decisions I make within team are difficult; make a number of choices; I was asked to replace a colleague on emergency leave; must be able to update management on what we ordered; did a lot of asking, digging through all related documents; challenge; things did not work out as expected; I held meetings every week to effectively communicate every matter; overcame; It was a tough task, but we managed to succeed; handled this challenge
	Leadership	Decisions; reminding my committees; importance and objectives of event; boost motivation; achieving ultimate goal; getting the job done effectively and efficiently; supervise
	Interpersonal	Communicate effectively; ask other colleagues; phone conversation; effectively communicate
	Adaptability	Replaced my senior colleague; must be able to update management on what ordered; asked other colleagues; I even spent my lunch hour digging through all related documents; ensured I am familiar with the case; flexibility; willing; enthusiasm to adapt to change.
	Teamwork	Within a team; communication between team members; team project; involved group conversations; with my teammates, meetings with my previous boss and colleague
	Personal qualities	Completed all three projects ahead of time; did a lot of asking; digging through related documents; although it made me less likeable; put my emotions aside; common to every career; open to healthy criticism and taking every opportunity for training classes
Reserved	Problem-solving	Way to resolve;
	Interpersonal	Carry out a good conversation; like to listen to complaints; deal with customers
	Adaptability	Think I can take up any job to work in this company
	Personal qualities	Customer always right even though they do mistakes; that is the fact
Unsuccessful	Problem-solving	Solved in a dignified manner; find an amicable solution
	Interpersonal	Talking to the manager; asking him what he thinks; having meetings; get ideas from experts
	Personal qualities	Facing problems is common

critical thinking, teamwork, initiative, problem solving, conflict management, personal/professional development, commercial awareness, decision making, lifelong learning, and global skills. This would also be helpful for educators in teaching the undergraduates the importance of words and phrases to portray their employability skills. Employability skills could be taught in different phases, such as preparatory, placement, and reflection and use of words and phrases to portray these skills. Even though the present study was conducted in Malaysia, the implications of this study have the potential to be applied to other countries where English is not the first language.

Despite the study's findings, one caveat pertains to data collection. The participating organisation did not allow the researcher to observe the interview sessions, and future studies should aim to have direct contact with interviewees in the interview process.

Conclusion

The present findings show that proficiency plays an important role in job interviews. The interviewer was able to elicit precise information when interviewees had appreciable language proficiency, which was evident in the responses provided by the successful interviewees. They used appropriate words and phrases that manifested proficiency and confidence in their interactions. When a "smooth" interaction took place, it was an indication of the interviewee's ability to display their employability skills.

This study has contributed significantly to a better understanding of the skills expressed by new graduates in their job interviews, especially in the Malaysian setting where English is a second language. Spoken English is important here as the majority of organisations are in the private sector, and English is the main medium of interaction, internally and externally. Rasul et al.'s (2013) list of employability skills and the integration of STF (Patton & McMahon, 1999, 2006; Spawa & Hassan, 2013) assisted greatly in the analysis as their inclusion led to finding a better structure for understanding the results, especially for comparisons made among the successful, unsuccessful, and reserved interviewees. Further studies can explore job interview candidates based on documents, employability skill evaluation forms, and questionnaires to identify important graduate employability skills as perceived by employers.

In summary, the study revealed that language proficiency plays a crucial role in job interviews as it can define and separate different groups of interviewees. Though the reserved and unsuccessful might possess qualities that could be useful and desired by the relevant organizations, their limited proficiency can hamper them from being selected.

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