

EXPLORING THE LANGUAGE USE AND SOCIAL INTERACTION STRATEGIES BY FRESH GRADUATES JOB INTERVIEWS FOR 21ST CENTURY WORKPLACE

SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

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EXPLORING THE LANGUAGE USE AND SOCIAL INTERACTION
STRATEGIES BY FRESH GRADUATES JOB INTERVIEWS
FOR 21ST CENTURY WORKPLACE

ISAI AMUTAN KRISHNAN

THESIS PRESENTED TO QUALIFY FOR A DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION
SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

2024



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"A true teacher would never tell you what to do. Instead, they would provide you with the knowledge to make the best decisions for yourself."
(From Sati by Christopher Pike)

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to investigate the English language proficiency of fresh graduates in Malaysia during job interviews, addressing a notable research gap surrounding the potential impact of poor English language on their employability. The present study shed light on the crucial nexus between language competence and readiness for employment. The present study employed a qualitative method. The study involved nine candidates (three successful, three reserved, and three unsuccessful) from local universities across various disciplines. Additionally, three hiring managers, three language instructors, two interviewers, and ten post job interview candidates participated in the study. The analysis of job interview data was conducted using Canale and Swain's grammar competence and Johnson and Johnson's social interaction strategies theories. The findings revealed that candidates predominantly utilised simple sentences, hindering their ability to express complete thoughts due to poor language proficiency. Successful candidates demonstrated superior proficiency in employing social interaction strategies compared to their reserved and unsuccessful candidates, highlighting the persisting challenge of poor language proficiency among fresh graduates as a significant barrier to employment. Both hiring managers and language instructors identified language proficiency as a major obstacle to employment and recommended integrating essential language components into existing course/training modules to better prepare undergraduates for job interviews and address the issue of unemployment among fresh graduates in Malaysia. Although interviewers deemed candidates' language proficiency acceptable post-interview, it was noted to fall short of being exceptional. Candidates themselves acknowledged their language proficiency deficiencies and lack of preparation. To tackle these challenges, the study recommended integrating both sentence structures and social interaction strategies into existing course modules for job interviews and professional communication courses. It emphasised the critical role of language proficiency and social interaction skills in job readiness, with implications for both higher learning institutions and the corporate sector in Malaysia.





MENEROKA PENGGUNAAN BAHASA DAN STRATEGI INTERAKSI SOSIAL DALAM KALANGAN GRADUAN BARU LEPASAN IJAZAH DI MALAYSIA ABAD KE-21 DALAM TEMU DUGA KERJA

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji penguasaan bahasa Inggeris graduan baru di Malaysia semasa temu duga kerja; dengan penekanan terhadap menangani jurang penyelidikan yang ketara meliputi potensi kesan bahasa Inggeris yang lemah terhadap kebolehpasaran mereka. Kajian ini memberi penerangan berkenaan hubungan penting antara kecekapan bahasa dan kesediaan untuk pekerjaan. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kualitatif. Kajian itu melibatkan sembilan calon (tiga orang berstatus berjaya, tiga orang berstatus simpanan, dan tiga orang berstatus tidak berjaya) dari universiti tempatan merentasi pelbagai disiplin. Di samping itu, tiga orang pengurus pengambilan, tiga orang pengajar bahasa, dua orang penemu duga dan sepuluh orang calon yang telah menjalani temu duga mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini. Analisis data temu duga kerja dijalankan dengan menggunakan kecekapan tatabahasa Canale dan Swain serta teori strategi interaksi sosial Johnson dan Johnson. Penemuan kajian menunjukkan bahawa calon kebanyakannya menggunakan ayat mudah telah menghalang keupayaan mereka untuk menyatakan pemikiran yang lengkap kerana penguasaan bahasa yang lemah. Calon yang berjaya menunjukkan kecekapan yang unggul dalam menggunakan strategi interaksi sosial berbanding calon berstatus dalam simpanan dan tidak berjaya; menonjolkan cabaran berterusan penguasaan bahasa yang lemah dalam kalangan graduan baharu sebagai penghalang penting kepada pekerjaan. Pengurus pengambilan pekerja dan pengajar bahasa telah mengenal pasti penguasaan bahasa sebagai penghalang utama kepada pekerjaan dan mengesyorkan penyepaduan komponen kepentingan bahasa di dalam modul kursus sedia ada untuk persediaan lebih baik kepada mahasiswa untuk temu duga kerja dan menangani isu pengangguran graduan baru lepasan ijazah di Malaysia. Walaupun penemuduga menganggap penguasaan bahasa calon boleh diterima selepas proses temu duga namun ini merupakan satu kegagalan yang luar biasa. Calon-calon sendiri mengakui kelemahan penguasaan bahasa dan kurang persediaan. Bagi menangani cabaran ini, kajian ini mengesyorkan mengintegrasikan kedua-dua struktur ayat dan strategi interaksi sosial ke dalam modul kursus sedia ada untuk temu duga kerja dan kursus komunikasi profesional. Ini menekankan peranan penting penguasaan bahasa dan kemahiran interaksi sosial dalam kesediaan kerja dengan implikasi untuk kedua-dua institusi pengajian tinggi dan sektor korporat di Malaysia.



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, it has become evident that fresh Malaysian graduates may need additional support to secure employment following the completion of their university studies, particularly after obtaining their bachelor's degrees. The National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2015-2025 (Malaysian Higher Education of Malaysia, 2019) (MHEM) emphasizes various employable attributes such as expertise in their respective fields, positive attitudes, diligence, teamwork, leadership potential, solid mathematical skills, and a favorable personality. Additionally, proficiency in the English language (henceforth referred to as language proficiency) has emerged as a significant asset that can enhance their career prospects. This necessity has been underscored in numerous newspaper articles over the years (JobStreet, 2013; 2014; Singh & Singh, 2008; Sravani, 2015; Rajeandram & Abdul Karim, 2016; Abu Bakar,

2018; Al-Atabi, 2019; Ujang, 2019; Abu Bakar, 2020; Kenayathulla, 2021; Allison, 2022).

In Malaysia, the government's vision is to cultivate a greater number of graduates, a crucial component in realizing its broader objective of enhancing socio-economic status, particularly aiming to achieve developed and industrialized nation status by 2025. This commitment is underscored in the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2015-2025 (MHEM, 2019).

Aligned with the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2015-2025, higher learning institutions (HLIs) are tasked with a pivotal role in preparing graduates for the demands of the 21st-century workplace (Kenayathulla, Ahmad & Idris, 2019; Kenayathulla, 2021). Thus, prioritizing quality teaching emerges as the most influential avenue for universities to foster an effective educational approach. However, laying the groundwork for a robust teaching framework should commence at the primary and secondary education levels as well. The Ministry of Higher Education (hereafter referred to as the Ministry) is actively involved in evaluating teaching quality across schools, universities, and colleges, aiming to develop effective pedagogical methods tailored to meet the evolving needs of the 21st-century workplace (MHEM, 2019).

The Ministry should strive to revamp the curriculum, incorporating skills pertinent to the modern workplace, such as critical and creative thinking, professional leadership, personal development, effective communication, social acumen, cultural competence, lifelong learning, adaptability, and service orientation (MHEM, 2019;



Rios, Ling, Pugh, Becker & Bacall, 2020; Chau, 2021). There exists a plethora of expectations on HLIs to produce graduates with proficient English language skills to address the demands of the current job market, both locally and globally (MHM, 2019; Su-Hie, Ernisa, Kee-Man, Jeck & Collin, 2017; Ab Rahman, Mohamed, Saidin, & Ahmad Nasir, 2019).

A job interview serves as a crucial assessment tool in the employment process. In Malaysia, numerous employers, including multinational companies and government-linked companies (GLCs), conduct interviews in English to gauge candidates' language proficiency and their ability to communicate effectively (Pandey & Pandey, 2014; Turiman, Abdullah & Mohd Noor, 2018; Keith, 2018).



According to a survey by JobStreet.com, 64% of employers mentioned that graduates exhibited poor language skills, which hindered their chances of securing positions (JobStreet, 2014; cited in Su-Hie et al., 2017). Consistent with this finding, Kenayathulla et al. (2019) highlighted that many employers expect fresh graduates to possess proficiency in English to thrive in the 21st-century workplace. Consequently, English proficiency has become a prerequisite for employment, underscoring the need for higher learning institutions (HLIs) to prioritize language training to equip graduates with the requisite skills demanded by employers in contemporary workplaces.





1.1 Background of the Study

Malaysia boasts a rich tapestry of cultures and languages, fostering a diverse society where communication varies depending on locale, region, and community. Nevertheless, the nation's education policy emphasizes the importance of two key languages for all citizens. Malay serves as the official and national language, while English stands as a vital second language, mandated from primary through secondary education levels (Omar, 1992). Despite governmental efforts, recent graduates continue to grapple with language proficiency issues.

This linguistic challenge extends beyond mere communication barriers. Unemployment among graduates can lead to disillusionment, adversely impacting mental well-being and adding strain to the country's resources. Moreover, a surge in joblessness may ripple through the economy, threatening national stability and exacerbating financial hardships.

The language proficiency dilemma, prevalent since the turn of the millennium, has prompted research endeavors. Taliff and Noor (2009) delved into potential causes, noting a discrepancy between the skills imparted and those demanded in the workforce. While Malaysian students undergo approximately 11 years of English instruction, with an onset in primary school at age seven and continuation through secondary education until age 17, Taliff and Noor (2009) identified oral proficiency as paramount for successful interviews and workplace interactions. They advocate for a recalibration of educational focus to prioritize oral communication skills, vital for articulating ideas and engaging in dialogue effectively.





1.1.1 English Language Courses in Tertiary Level and Language Proficiency

Most public and private universities offer language programs for undergraduates, spanning from their first semester to the end of their academic journey (Razianna, 2005). These programs, such as English for Learning, English for Professional, Academic English, English for Communication, and Mastering English for Proficiency, cover four essential components: reading, writing, speaking, and listening, in accordance with Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) policies (MHEM, 2016).

However, Taliff and Noor (2009) found that the English language programs provided to undergraduates may not be adequate. Through a survey conducted among several universities, they discovered varying opinions among respondents regarding the efficacy of these programs. Consequently, Taliff and Noor (2009) proposed that tertiary institutions should consider developing English language programs linked to workplace requirements. This alignment would ensure that undergraduates develop and refine language skills essential for future employment.

The findings of Taliff and Noor (2009) are supported by Too (2017) and Zainuddin et al. (2019), emphasizing the need to revisit language programs based on job market demands. Programs like English for Communication, English for Professional, and Language for Employment, offered towards the end of semesters, aim to prepare undergraduates for job interviews. These programs cover areas such as resume/curriculum vitae writing, cover letters/application letters, email etiquette, presentations, and business writing. Moreover, they focus on developing





employability skills like interpersonal skills, teamwork, communication skills, leadership, and management skills.

In line with Taliff and Noor (2009), Too (2017) stresses that the effectiveness of English programs must be monitored to ensure undergraduates apply their learning during job interviews. HLIs (MHEM 2019) suggest that each university in Malaysia tailors its English/proficiency courses to specific learning outcomes aligned with different faculties, such as business, economics, accounting, engineering, and sciences, covering speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Too, 2017).

Too (2017) observed that some public universities offer courses such as English for the workplace, English for career preparation, and English for communications, focusing on presentation skills, business proposal writing, job interviews, meeting minutes, and CV/resume writing. However, Too (2017) notes the importance of regularly updating these courses to reflect current market demands.

The integration of grammar components into existing course modules, as highlighted by various studies, including Mustafa (2018), Puad and Desa (2020), Abd Rahman et al. (2020), Misni, Nik Mahmood, and Jamil (2020), Sohaimi and Senasi (2020), and Mahathir and Vethasalam (2021), is crucial. This integration aims to align with emerging trends in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), facilitating candidates' seamless engagement in job interviews (Krishnan et al., 2022; Yong and Saad, 2023; Carmen, 2023).



There is a growing demand, as noted by Harris (2008) and Banegas (2011), for integrating language components with subject matter-content in education and workplaces. This integration, though debatable in terms of its point, addresses language-related issues within a broader context, meeting specific employment requirements. Furthermore, the dominance of the English language in Information Technology, communication platforms, and global interactions underscores its importance. As the world shifts towards cyber-savvy communication and globalization, proficiency in English becomes indispensable for participating in various industries and global affairs (Musa, Koo, & Azman, 2012; Too, 2017).

In conclusion, Malaysian graduates need a strong command of the English language to excel in various industries and navigate the global market. Therefore, HLIs play a crucial role in equipping undergraduates with the necessary language proficiency to succeed in their future careers.

1.1.2 Industry 4.0 and Language Proficiency

In her address at the Kuala Lumpur Global Youth Summit (KLGYS), the Higher Education Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Noraini Ahmad, emphasized that employers seek candidates equipped with skills and knowledge relevant to the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0), ranging from digital proficiency to soft skills (Bernama, 2022; Nasreen, Halili & Abdul Razak, 2022). She underscored that completing a degree marks the beginning, not the end, of learning, urging young individuals to continuously reskill and upskill themselves. Noraini Ahmad highlighted



that academic performance alone does not determine employability in today's job market.

Aligned with her remarks on career progression and market adaptability, the contemporary workplace of the 21st century is intertwined with IR 4.0. The concept of the 'smart factory,' pioneered by Kagermann, Wahlster, and Helbig (2013) in Germany, prioritizes cyber-physical systems that interact with humans through cloud computing and inter-organizational collaboration.

Peck (2018) and Mian et al. (2020) assert that the success of recent graduates in IR 4.0 hinges on their ability to enhance their language proficiency to effectively meet the demands of this evolving industrial landscape. This perspective resonates with the sentiments expressed by a Vice-Chancellor from a Malaysian public university, who emphasizes that transitioning to IR 4.0 necessitates graduates to strengthen their communication skills, independence, adaptability, entrepreneurial mindset, and critical thinking abilities. These competencies are crucial for effective engagement with advanced technologies, especially given the ubiquitous nature of cloud-based mobility in contemporary industries. Proficiency in language, particularly during job interviews, plays a pivotal role in acquiring the aforementioned attributes (Christina, 2018; Chaka, 2020; Khan et al., 2021).

In line with the imperatives of IR 4.0, the Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the Roadmap for English Language Education in Malaysia spanning 2015-2025 to standardize English instruction in schools and higher learning institutions (HLIs) according to current market demands. This initiative aims to start from



preschool through tertiary education, ensuring that graduates possess the requisite language skills to compete globally, where trade, commerce, and academic research are predominantly conducted in English (Mohd Don, 2016; Sani, 2016; Halili, Sulaiman, Hamidah & Rafiza, 2021).

In pursuit of its vision to achieve developed nation status by 2030, the Malaysian government has consistently underscored the significance of English language acquisition among its populace. Whether through schools or universities, the government has continuously endeavored to empower its youth, particularly those in tertiary institutions, by providing them with relevant skills and fostering a well-rounded education. This includes offering entrepreneurship development courses and encouraging social engagement (Ragulina, Elena, Irina, Elena & Elena, 2018; Chua,

These governmental efforts are aimed at facilitating the smooth transition of fresh graduates from academia to the workforce. In alignment with the goal of enhancing language proficiency among graduates, the Ministry has implemented various language policies through its Education Blueprint (Bakri, 2007; Artyushina & Olga, 2018; Yüceol, 2021).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

According to the labour survey report (2019), HLIs produce over 200,000 fresh graduates annually. However, some have remained unemployed due to several factors

and one of the reasons is poor language proficiency (Department of Statistics, 2019; Goh; 2020).

The increase in the number of local fresh graduates competing in the employment market indicates that HLIs need to revisit their curriculum to make it relevant to the current employment situation (Shanmugam, 2017). There are several issues reported on employment which will be discussed in the next sub-headings.

1.2.1 Issues Reported by Local Online Media

Malaysia supports the transition of the economy to foreign investment, drive labour productivity and knowledge-driven to other sectors. Therefore, graduates are required to be prepared to meet the market demand on employability, especially for 21st century workplace. However, local fresh graduates have become the focus of issues with regards like unemployment, poor command of language proficiency in grammar; sentence structures and interaction skills during job interviews have been highlighted year after year (JobStreet, 2013; 2014; Singh & Singh, 2008; Sravani, 2015, Rajeandram & Abdul Karim, 2016; Abu Bakar, 2018; Al-Atabi, 2019; Ujang, 2019; Abu Bakar, 2020; Shamsuddin & Christina, 2020; Kenayathulla, 2021; Allison, 2022; FMT Reporters, 2022; TheSun, 2023; 2024, Ramalingam, 2024; Utusan Malaysia, 2024).

1.2.2 Issues on Interactions in Job Interviews

Apart from proficiency, other issues like the interactions of graduates in job interviews have been raised. Ranjit (2009) reported that graduates demonstrated poor interactional skills. Roulston (2013) noted that due to the interactional problems among candidates' in understanding the questions posed by the interviewers received only minimal responses.

Further, Darmi and Albion (2013) noted that Malaysian fresh graduates had low confidence and feared interviews as they were conducted in the English language, in which they had low proficiency. They feared their low language proficiency limited their ability to understand and respond to the questions or statements from interviewers. Rahman (2015), Rachel, Fauziah and Teoh (2017) and Lai (2024) also noted that that due to poor English, graduates had interactional difficulties s to clearly articulate and express their thoughts vividly to interviewers.

Rahman (2015) highlighted the inadequate proficiency in constructing sentences among graduates during job interviews. This deficiency led to miscommunication, forcing employers to repeat or rephrase questions multiple times. During interview interactions, employers noticed the low language proficiency among fresh graduates, resulting in their applications being rejected. Consistent with Rahman (2015), Krishnan, Hee, Ramalingam, and Maruthai (2017) reported that many fresh graduates misinterpreted questions and struggled to provide answers due to poor proficiency. Additionally, Turiman, Abdullah, and Mohd Noor (2018) noted that both

the speaker and listener need to project themselves effectively to facilitate meaningful interactions in job interviews, which are crucial attributes for prospective employees.

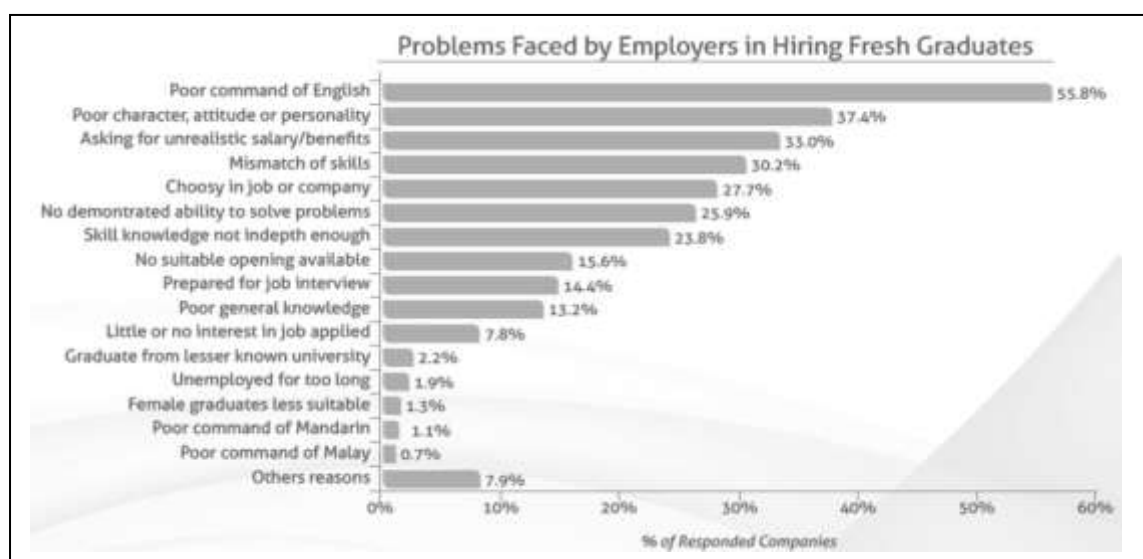
In line with Turiman, Abdullah and Mohd Noor (2018), Suraprajit (2020) reported that many employers who expect fresh graduates who have good language proficiency to avoid facing problems in comprehending the interview questions and unable to respond to the interviewer due to poor proficiency. Further, Wan Hassan, Awang and Abdullah (2022) noted that they were many unfavourable comments about fresh graduates in carrying out the interaction in job interviews due to poor language proficiency. These studies have shown that language proficiency is important in order to carry out meaningful interactions between candidates and interviewer in job interviews to create a favourable impression on the candidates.

1.2.3 Issues Highlighted in Previous Studies by Malaysia Employers on Proficiency

There were some issues highlighted by Malaysia employers. Figure 1.1 below was extracted from Jobstreet.com (2013) as evidence to illustrate what employers say of the local graduates who had attended interviews and were not considered as suitable by the employers.

Figure 1.1

Problems Faced by Employers in Hiring Fresh Graduates



Sources: *JobStreet.com (2013); The National Graduate Employability Blueprint (2012-2017)*

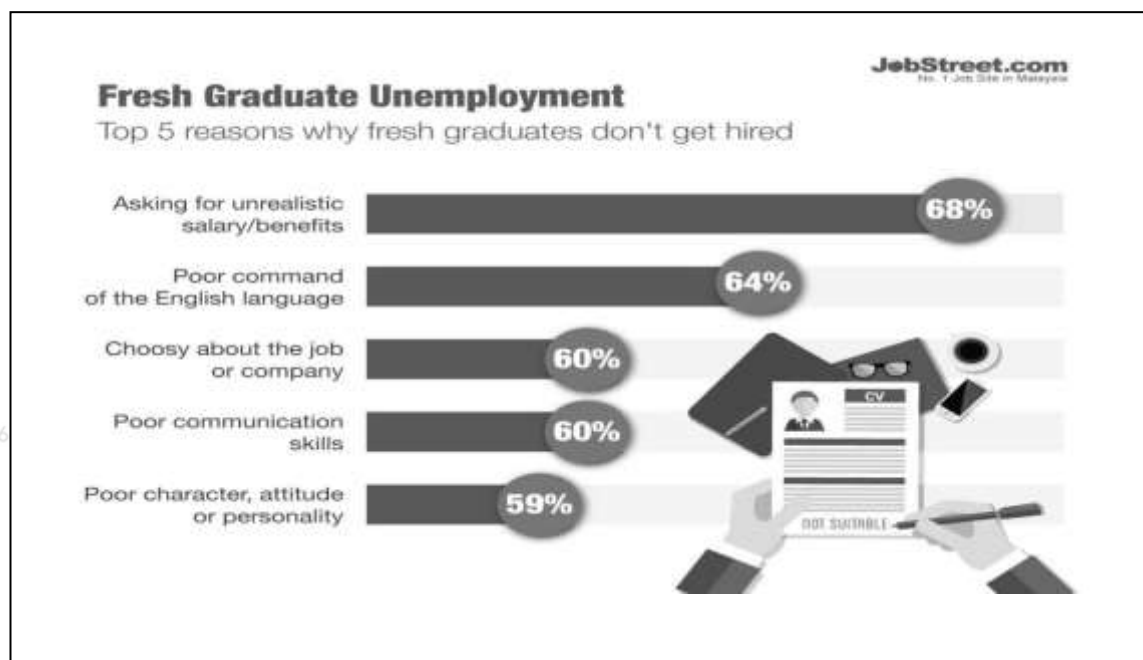
Figure 1.1 clearly illustrates that the employers had taken note that local graduates carried many issues with them during interviews and there were more than one particular problem that stood in the way of the local graduates' employment. The figure indicates that the issue most commonly identified by employers when hiring fresh graduates include their:

- (1) *poor command of English (55.8%);*
- (2) *poor character, attitude or personality (37.4%);*
- (3) *demand for unrealistic salary/benefits (33%);*
- (4) *being choosy in regard to the job or company (27.7%); and*
- (5) *inability to solve problems (25.9%).*

Further, it was reported by (MHEM, 2014) via JobStreet.com's survey (2014) of 472 managers in the Nation which investigated the main reason fresh graduates remain unemployed also verified the same issue as seen Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2

Top five reasons Why Fresh Graduates Do Not Get Hired



Source: *JobStreet.com* (2014)

According to Figure 1.2, the top five reasons fresh graduates do not get hired are:

- demanding unrealistic salary/benefits (68%);
- poor command of the English language (64%);
- being choosy about the job or company (60%);
- poor communication skills (60%); and
- poor character, attitude or personality (59%).

It shows that, a poor command of the English language is rated as the second reason (64%). Upon comparison with Figure 1.1 (Job Street, 2013; Meor, 2018), there is a slight increase from 55.8% to 64% over a two-year span, a difference of 8.2%. Although the difference is relatively small, it is still a grave concern as it seems to be one of the main factors of the unemployment. The top two reasons of unemployment surveyed by Job Street (2014) were also consistent with the report written by Amar (2015) and Syed (2015) on the poor proficiency of fresh graduates.

These findings have been consistent with the National Graduate Employability Blueprint, there are several studies conducted on the perspectives of Malaysia employers on the language proficiency of graduates. A study conducted by Su-Hie et al. (2017) reported that language proficiency was essential for the employment. They also reported that some candidates spoke in “broken and atrocious English”, and did not use proper grammar that resulted in an interaction breakdown during the interviews (Su-Hie et al., 2017, p. 322-324). The study also reported that if applicants “speak with a very clear manner, people will understand them”. Similarly, Azza Jauhar and Samsiah (2017) reported that language competence, especially in grammar was crucial to carry out proper meaningful interactions in workplace.

Furthermore, Fan, Feia, Schrievera and Fan (2017) and Phan, Nguyen and Nguyen (2022). conducted a study on communicative competence and employability. It was found that the ability to communicate in English was one of the top criteria in employability. Additionally, Zainuddin et al. (2019) reported that employers and fresh graduates agreed that English language skills played a major role in employability. Zainuddin et al. (2019, p.79-93) further reported that private business and the industry

also stressed that good language proficiency was needed “for them to hire Malaysian graduates, and for Malaysia to be competitive in the international trade and industry”. It was further revealed that fresh graduates who showed poor language proficiency in job interview failed to get jobs (Zainuddin et al., 2019). Correspondingly, Ab Rahman et al. (2019, p.78) reiterated that “fresh graduates displayed poor language proficiency during presentations, discussions, meetings and in emails”. In line with, Zainuddin et al. (2019), Masduki and Zakaria (2020) highlighted that in order to work effectively, full attention should be given to the workplace communication where language proficiency played an essential role. Further, Singh and Raja Harun (2020) noted that language proficiency is was required in conducting numerous tasks at the workplace. Similarly, Kamil and Muhammad (2021) and Narayanan, Ismail, Krishnasamy, Yusuf, Yusuf, and Krishnan (2022) reported that in order to carry out a task in a workplace, speaking competence plays an important role.

Several studies conducted by Masduki and Zakaria in 2020, Kamil and Muhammad in 2021, and Narayanan et al. in 2022. These studies highlight the importance of gathering feedback from hiring managers regarding the performance of recent graduates in job interviews. They suggest that it is beneficial to seek feedback from interviewers after the job interview process for clarity and improvement purposes. This feedback is valuable and should be consistently evaluated to address any issues that may hinder fresh graduates from securing employment (Narayanan et al., 2022). Additionally, Kamil and Muhammad (2021) highlighted the importance of conducting post-job interviews with candidates to assess their performance, identify strengths, and pinpoint areas of improvement. Both post-job interviews with

interviewers and candidates play a crucial role in preparing future undergraduates and job seekers.

The studies mentioned above underscored that poor attention is given to language proficiency in the workplace. Furthermore, they stressed the significance of exploring the perspectives of hiring managers and obtaining feedback on performance during job interviews, both from the interviewers and the candidates could be crucial for anticipating positive outcomes in job interviews.

1.2.4 Issues in the Curriculum Design and Malaysian Graduate Employability Competency

As noted by Harris (2008) and Banegas (2011), revising, revamping, or integrating language components into existing course modules to meet current needs is essential in the modern era. In Malaysia, HLIs should play a vital role in improving the language proficiency of recent graduates. Mustafa (2018) stressed the importance of language proficiency and recommended that pertinent ministries, universities, and agencies prioritize comprehensive and inclusive English language education plans from school to tertiary levels. Mustafa further emphasised the need for students in their second year or third semester at universities to be equipped with the necessary language tools required for workplace communication, which can prepare them for job positions. Therefore, to enhance students' language proficiency, the English language education plan should be revised.



The suggestion by Mustafa's (2018) is supported by Elankovan (2018) who has pointed out that the Malaysian education system that is technology-centric learning, should emphasis on acquiring English language skills. Elankovan (2018) further noted that the purpose for learning English and the approach to teaching it, must also place greater emphasis on the communicative aspects.

In line with Mustafa (2018) and Elankovan (2018), the study conducted by Misni, Nik Mahmood and Jamil (2020) also suggested to reorganise the curriculum of the Malaysian Education on the employability competencies as well as the abilities of Malaysian graduates to be prepared better for the 21st century workplace. Crossley and Kim (2019) also noted that some linguistics features need to be integrated to enhance speaking proficiency, as in job interviews. In accordance with Misni, Nik Mahmood and Jamil (2020), Sohaimi and Senasi (2020) proposed that the module should contain work-integrated language learning activities or required language components that are within an academic curriculum for an effective pedagogical intervention in HLIs. Similarly, Puad and Desa (2020) and Abd Rahman et al. (2020) reported to revisit the training program based on the job market demand. Mahathir and Vethasalam (2021) opined that Malaysia's education structure is outmoded and it needed a serious attention to rectify.

In the context of investigating the perception of language instructors, a critical aspect for the present study, as emphasised by Isni, Nik Mahmood, and Jamil (2020), Abd Rahman et al. (2020), and Mahathir and Vethasalam (2021), is the integration of language components into existing course modules. Language instructors who conduct lectures on language for employment, preparing undergraduates for the





workforce, play a pivotal role. Their input is expected to yield positive outcomes not only in identifying the lacking language components but also in recommending the integration of these components into the existing course modules. This integration aims to address deficiencies and enhance language proficiency for the benefit of the undergraduates and job seekers.

Further, Ma'dan, Imail, and Daud (2020) and Scott and Willison (2021) reported that teaching pedagogy and course modules may need to be revised to enhance the competence of graduates in employment world. They further suggested that in some language components may need to be added or integrated based on the current emerging trends in job interviews and workplace environment. Likewise, Scott and Willison (2021) suggested that course modules should be related to employability and prepare and integrate what is lacked to meet the job market demand and it has to be in line with HLIs. In line with Scott and Willison (2021), Flores and Petropoulou (2021) and Mari, Ng, Gunasagaran and Kuppusamy (2022) also suggested that a strategic assessment related to employability especially communication should be developed which integrated with course programs. Hence, this indicates that the current curriculum, as well as language course module, may need to be revamped constructively to meet the workforce demand. These claims may have to be adjusted to the existing situations by the relevant authorities so that they are well received to be efficacious.

The improvement of language proficiency among Malaysian fresh graduates is crucial. Various studies highlight the significant challenges associated with this, particularly in relation to job interviews and workplace interactions. These challenges





encompass inadequate English proficiency, lack of confidence, anxiety about interviews conducted in English, and struggles with articulating thoughts and constructing coherent sentences. Employers consistently express apprehensions about these issues, resulting in the rejection of job applications and, consequently, contributing to unemployment among fresh graduates.

Furthermore, employers have highlighted specific problems faced during interviews, such as poor character and attitude, unrealistic salary demands, being choosy about job opportunities, and an inability to solve problems. The prominence of language-related issues, including poor language proficiency and communication skills, is evident in employer surveys, reinforcing the need for targeted interventions in language proficiency.



The curriculum design and competencies of Malaysian graduates have also been identified as contributing factors to the language proficiency challenges. Recommendations from previous studies advocate for the revision of curriculum structures, integrating language components, and emphasising communicative aspects of English language education. The alignment of education plans with workplace communication requirements is crucial for adequately preparing graduates for the demands of the 21st-century workplace.

Given the persistent challenges and the crucial role of language proficiency in employability, especially in the globalised landscape of the 21st-century workplace (Kenayathulla et al., 2019), it is essential to conduct a comprehensive study on job interview data. This study seeks to analyze and evaluate current language proficiency



levels, with a specific emphasis on grammar-sentence structures, social interaction strategies, and the perspectives of hiring managers and language instructors during job interviews.

By undertaking such an investigation, the results obtained could serve as a valuable resource for incorporating essential language components into existing training modules for undergraduates. This proactive approach ensures that aspiring graduates are adequately equipped with the linguistic skills necessary to navigate job interviews successfully. The findings from this study, detailed in Table 1.1, offer a clear and concise summary of the identified issues in language proficiency, guiding the development of targeted interventions to enhance the employability of Malaysian fresh graduates.

To sum up, language proficiency is an important feature in employability, especially in an era of globalisation in 21st century workplace (Kenayathulla et al., 2019). Therefore, a study needs to be conducted on job interview data which can be analysed to evaluate the level of language proficiency particularly grammar-sentence structures, social interaction strategies, the perceptions of hiring managers and language instructors in job interviews. The results can help to integrate required language components in existing training modules for undergraduates to prepare for job interviews. Table 1.1 show the summary of the problem statement.

**Table 1.1***Summary of the Problem Statement*

No	Authors and Year	Issues
1.	JobStreet (2013; 2014); Singh & Singh (2008); Sravani (2015); Rajeandram & Abdul Karim (2016); Abu Bakar (2018); Al-Atabi (2019); Ujang (2019); Abu Bakar (2020); Shamsuddin & Christina (2020); Kenayathulla (2021); Allison (2022); FMT Reporters (2022); TheSun (2023)	Unemployment, poor command of language proficiency in grammar, sentence structures, and interaction skills during job interviews.
2.	Ranjit (2009); Roulston (2013); Darmi and Albion (2013); Rahman (2015); Rachel, Fauziah, and Teoh (2017); Krishnan, Hee, Ramalingam and Maruthai (2017); Turiman, Abdullah and Mohd Noor (2018); Suraprajit (2020); Wan Hassan, Awang and Abdullah (2022)	Poor interactional skills, lack of confidence, fear of interviews due to low English proficiency, and difficulties in articulating thoughts in job interviews.
3.	JobStreet.com (2013); The National Graduate Employability Blueprint (2012-2017); MHEM (2014); Amar (2015); Syed (2015); Su-Hie et al. (2017); Azza Jauhar and Samsiah (2017); Fan, Feia, Schrievera and Fan (2017); Phan, Nguyen and Nguyen (2022); Zainuddin et al. (2019); Ab Rahman et al. (2019); Masduki and Zakaria (2020); Singh and Raja Harun (2020); Kamil and Muhammad (2021); Narayanan, Ismail, Krishnasamy, Yusuf, Yusuf, and Krishnan (2022)	Poor command of English, poor communication skills, demanding unrealistic salary/benefits, being choosy, inability to solve problems, and poor character, attitude or personality.
4.	Mustafa (2018); Elankovan (2018); Misni, Nik Mahmood and Jamil (2020); Crossley and Kim (2019); Sohaimi and Senasi (2020); Puad and Desa (2020); Abd Rahman et al. (2020); Mahathir and Vethasalam (2021); Ma'dan, Imail, and Daud (2020); Scott and Willison (2021); Flores and Petropoulou (2021); Mari, Ng, Gunasagaran and Kuppusamy (2022)	Issues in the curriculum design and Malaysian graduate employability competency, including the need for language proficiency enhancement and revising course modules.



Table 1.1 summarises various authors' observations on issues affecting Malaysian graduate employability. These include poor language proficiency and interaction skills, fear of interviews, unrealistic job expectations, and shortcomings in curriculum design. Addressing these concerns could enhance graduates' readiness for the job market and improve their employability prospects.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the language proficiency of fresh graduates during job interviews, with a focus on aligning their skills with the contemporary demands of the 21st-century workplace. The research also delved into the dynamics of interaction between interviewers and candidates, specifically examining grammar competence-sentence structures, and social interaction strategies in responding to structured job interview questions. By analysing language proficiency through the perspectives of hiring managers, language instructors, and post job Interview feedback from both interviewers and candidates, the study was able to identify key language components essential for success in job interviews. The findings could inform the integration of these components into existing training modules, equipping undergraduates with the necessary language skills to enhance their competence in securing employment successfully.

1.4 Research Objectives

Based on the purpose of the study, four objectives were constructed as follows:

- i) to investigate the performance of successful, unsuccessful and reserved candidates in job interviews in the used of:
 - a. sentence structures
 - b. social interaction strategies
- ii) to investigate the perceptions of hiring managers and language instructors on the language proficiency in English of fresh graduates in their job interviews
- iii) to investigate post job interview feedback from both interviewers and candidates regarding the interview performance
- iv) to investigate the usefulness of language components in a training module for undergraduates in job interviews

1.5 Research Questions

Based on the research objectives, the present study is guided by the following research questions:

1. a. How are the sentence structures employed by successful, unsuccessful, and reserved candidates in job interviews?
- b. What social interaction strategies do successful, unsuccessful, and reserved candidates employ in job interviews?

2. What are the perceptions of the hiring managers and language instructors of the language proficiency of fresh graduates in their job interviews?
3. What are the post job interview feedback from both interviewers and candidates regarding the interview performance?
4. What are the usefulness of language components in a training module for undergraduates in job interviews?

1.6 Significance of the Study

The significance of the study covers several aspects related to the study:

Firstly, the HLIs should have a guideline to gauge their own students' awareness of the requirements of what is important in the workplace. The findings of this study can provide a greater understanding that language proficiency plays an important role in getting a job. This outcome can be used by both the fresh graduates as well as current undergraduates to understand the different aspects of their language proficiency that would be useful in job interviews.

Secondly, this study may suggest to HLIs and policy makers to integrate/revise and revamp the current curriculum and the existing training modules on English for Employment based on the demand of the 21st century workplace. This training module can be based on the use of grammar competence-sentence structures, social interaction strategies as well as the perceptions of hiring managers and language instructors. In addition, workshops on job interview and mock job

interviews can be included into the current curriculum or in the existing course module as a form of preparation for the undergraduates.

Thirdly, the present study assists the corporate sector to gain a better understanding of the current graduates' language proficiency capabilities and help them to prepare themselves better for job interviews and industrial training. Emphasising on the importance of language proficiency to the fresh graduates will help them to prepare better to enter the global market in the 21st century workplace.

Fourthly, the Malaysian National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2015-2025 (MHEM, 2019) noted that to drive a company's growth, fresh graduates with appropriate language proficiency are required and they can only be identified from job interviews. Based on this claim, the findings of the current study can be also used to highlight to future candidates that academic qualifications are not the only factor that can determine success in job interviews or gain employment. They will certainly need to elevate their global employability skills in order to secure a job.

Fifthly, the present study also benefits the current students either in schools, universities or colleges that language proficiency plays an important role in getting a job. By using appropriate grammar, having good combination of sentence structures and using correct social interaction strategies may portray the candidates' proficiency. Their language competence can help them to describe and reflect on answers. Their answers should be mature, persuasive and convincing, orderly, logical, linked and show their confidence of their language proficiency in their interviews that are based

on the current market trends as well as on the 21st century workplace. Table 1.2 summarised the five significances of the study.

Table 1.2

Five Significances of the Study

No	Significance of the Study
1.	The study provides fresh graduates and current undergraduates with insights into the importance of language proficiency in job interviews, helping them understand different aspects that enhance employability.
2.	The findings suggest recommendations for Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) and policymakers to integrate, revise, and revamp the curriculum and training modules on English for Employment, aligning them with 21st-century workplace demands. Workshops and mock interviews can be included for better preparation.
3.	The study assists the corporate sector in understanding the language proficiency capabilities of current graduates, enabling them to better prepare for job interviews and industrial training, emphasizing the importance of language proficiency in the 21st-century workplace.
4.	The findings highlight to future candidates that academic qualifications alone may not determine success in job interviews or gaining employment. The study supports the Malaysian National Graduate Employability Blueprint's emphasis on the importance of language proficiency in identifying suitable candidates.
5.	The study benefits current students in schools, universities, or colleges by emphasising the role of language proficiency in job acquisition. It encourages the use of appropriate grammar, sentence structures, and social interaction strategies to enhance employability in line with current market trends and the 21st-century workplace.

1.7 Scope and Limitation of the Study

The present study focused on one respective set of interview data provided by one organisation that was walk-in interviews. This study was unable to extend its scope to



other sets of interviews and other groups of fresh graduates who will serve in the current study as candidates. The study was also restricted to one particular time and date that were allocated by the organisation for this interview.

Like other research, no one particular study can be perfect in one way. Likewise, this study experienced various limitations particularly during the design and planning of the study. The initial step was taken in current study was to send out a total of 300-350 emails and letters to various companies and organisations situated in the Klang Valley, Malaysia to acquire permission to conduct the study. The aims were to record the job interviews which were conducted by these organisations. However, only one organisation responded affirmatively as the organisation understood the essential nature of job interviews in Malaysia. However, the organisation imposed various terms and conditions before collecting the data for conducting this study, see Appendix A-Terms and Conditions of Collecting Data from the Organisation. A few essential limitations are deliberated below.

Firstly, the organisation conducts more than 100 walk-in-interviews in a year. However, only 70 interviews were recorded and can be used for the analysis. The present study employed qualitative method. Therefore, only 9 candidates' transcriptions (3-successful, 3-reserved and 3-unsuccessful) were used for the analysis. Secondly, the researcher was not allowed to be present to observe and do the audio recording. All the interview sessions recorded by the two interviewers in private and under strict confidence. During the data screening before analysis, the researcher was also expected to follow a few other rules. For instance, the transcribing process of the recorded audio interviews should be done in the employer's premise. The audio





interview sessions (data) were prohibited from being removed from the employer's premise. Selected excerpts based on the objectives of this study were allowed to be used for analysis purposes but were not allowed to attach the entire transcripts in the thesis as an appendix. However, upon request for validation purpose (verification/cross checking) to allow the researcher to bring out the transcription documents from the premises was allowed with consent from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) within the specific time frame.

Thirdly, as for the triangulation purpose (upon requested by the researcher) the organization considered to collect the post interview data from 10 candidates. It was done by the interviewers via Google Form with the consent of the candidates. Then, the data was given to the researcher with the consent letter. The definitions of terms



1.8 Definition of Terms

These terms have been defined so as to enable better understanding of this research.

1.8.1 Job Interviews

In their work, Dipboye, Macan, and Shahani-Denning (2012) and Tross and Todd (2008) define job interviews as a face-to-face meeting between a job seeker and an interviewer representing an organisation looking to hire staff. A job interview is a method commonly used by employers to determine whether an interviewee is fit for



the position that needs to be filled. There are various types of interview formats. For example, interviews can be of formal where the entire process is structured and the questions posed to the interviewees are specially formulated based on the requirements of the organisation. Interviews can also be conducted in an informal manner where the questions are not necessarily prepared in advance, unlike the formal approach which is based on a predetermined set of standard interview questions (Huffcutt, 2011). In this regard, a job interview is seen as a face-to-face interaction between two parties involving the interviewer and the candidate and it can be informal or semi-formal, depending on the personality of the interviewer.

1.8.2 English Language Proficiency

English language proficiency (also shortened to language proficiency in the present study) is an individual's ability to comprehend, speak, and write English (Canale & Swain, 1980; 1983). Definitions may vary among language instructors and organisations (Cummins, 1984). In this regard, language proficiency involves fluent, grammatically precise communication, incorporating proper grammar, sentence structures (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex), and communicative competence in appropriate contexts (Chomsky, 1965; Ulibarri, Spencer & Rivas, 1981; Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980; 1983).



1.8.3 Interaction

In the context of this study, social interaction strategies (Johnson, & Johnson, 1987) is viewed as a dynamic practice involving two or more individuals engaging in lively communication within a formal setting or an informal setting. The essence of this interaction lies in the frequent exchange of knowledge, discussions, opinions, questions, and thoughts. Derived from the concept of a two-way outcome, interaction emphasizes mutual influence among participants, distinguishing it from one-directional informal influence. The term "interconnectivity" is also relevant, highlighting the connections formed through various communications in a structured manner, potentially leading to unforeseen positive outcomes.



1.8.4 Training Module

A training module is offered in HLIs either government or private which covers a range of chapters or topics related to employment such as communication skills, employability, writing curriculum vitae or resume, cover letter and other essential factors pertaining to job interviews. Undergraduates learn the basic language forms and how they can be used correctly in workplaces. Several tasks and practices are taught by language instructors to undergraduates to have ideas of language proficiency that are required in the workplace.





1.8.5 Higher Learning Institutions

Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) are included in the present study. In Malaysia, HLI is under the jurisdiction of MOHE. The HLI consists of government and private educational institutions which offer courses on employability which have been accredited by MQA. These courses provide undergraduates with comprehensive ideas of the expectations of the job market.

1.8.6 Hiring Managers

Hiring managers or recruitment managers are in charge in respective organisations to supply manpower after conducting job interviews by following the organisation job interview guidelines or procedures. The hiring managers work closely with human resource department in selecting and hiring new staff with the best qualification and characteristic.





1.8.7 Language Instructors

Language instructors teach English language courses at the tertiary level for undergraduates towards the end of the degree programme. They teach English for professional, English for Employment, mastering English proficiency and reading and writing skills as university compulsory subjects. The instructors are also responsible for designing teaching lesson plans and course modules to keep track based on the job market demands. Apart from teaching, the instructors are required to impart to a research to serve universities.

1.8.8 Post-Job Interviews



A post job Interview is a process which takes place after the job interview with an interviewer or a candidate to evaluate the candidate's performance in job interviews. As with the interviewer, to evaluate the candidate's performance whether the candidate's successful or unsuccessful with specific reasons by using an evaluation form which entails, personal qualities, characteristic and employability skills as well as language competence. As for the candidate, it was to evaluate how the candidate answered or tackled the structured interview questions, whether the candidate was able to carry out a meaningful interaction with the interviewer, showed confidence level in getting a job or not. The Post Job Interview may help to provide insightful about the candidate.



1.8.9 Undergraduates

Based on the education perspective, an undergraduate is defined as a student who has not obtained or earned a bachelor degree. In other words, the undergraduate who is working towards a bachelor degree. As for the present study, the undergraduates defined as students from public universities who were attending English for Professional programme from social sciences and humanities courses which offered at the end of the semester.

1.9 Summary

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 provided an introduction and background of the study, the problem statement, research objectives and research questions, scope of the study and definition of terms. Subsequently, Chapter 2 illustrated the existing and updated literature pertinent to the study. Chapter 3 explained the methodology and the theoretical framework that used in the study such as sampling of data, the data collection and analysis procedures. Chapters 4 and 5 presented the analysis and discussion of five research questions. Chapter 6 provided an overall conclusion to summarise the entire study, limitations also highlighted and recommendations for further research in the related areas have been proposed. The structure of the thesis is provided in Figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3*Structure of the Thesis*