



# Perceptions and Practices of English Language Employability Skills in the KSA Job Market: Students' and Employers' Perspectives

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## Abstract

This study investigates the perceptions and practices of English language employability skills among university students and employers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Using a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from two distinct cohorts: fresh graduates aged 18–30 and HR professionals or employers aged 30–47, representing multiple industry sectors. Separate structured questionnaires incorporating Likert-scale and closed-ended items were administered to each group. Data were analysed using SPSS to identify frequencies, patterns, and inter-group discrepancies. Findings reveal a significant perception gap: employers consistently rated English language skills as critical to employability, while fresh graduates demonstrated varying levels of proficiency and confidence. Employers identified speaking and pronunciation, writing and grammar, and overall business communication as key areas of weakness in graduate candidates. Students, conversely, acknowledged the importance of English for employment but called for greater integration of practical language skills into university curricula. Qualitative employer interview data further corroborated these findings, emphasising English as the medium of international professional interaction. The study concludes with evidence-based recommendations for curriculum reform, industry–academia collaboration, professional development of teaching faculty, and extracurricular language enrichment initiatives to better align graduate competencies with KSA job market expectations in the context of Vision 2030.

**Keywords:** *English language skills, employability, KSA job market, fresh graduates, employer perceptions, language proficiency, ESP, Vision 2030, curriculum integration, workplace communication*

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary global economy, English language proficiency has emerged as one of the most consequential determinants of graduate employability. As organisations increasingly operate across national and linguistic borders, the ability to communicate, negotiate, and collaborate in English constitutes not merely an added advantage but a baseline occupational requirement across a widening range of professional sectors. This reality is particularly salient in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), where Vision 2030—the kingdom's landmark national transformation programme—articulates an explicit commitment to cultivating a globally competitive, knowledge-based national workforce (Alharbi, 2022). Against this backdrop, the alignment between higher education language provision and the English language demands of the KSA labour market has assumed both scholarly and policy significance.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) provides the theoretical and pedagogical framework most directly relevant to this alignment challenge. As a student-centred discipline that designs language instruction around the specific vocational and professional contexts learners will enter, ESP prioritises the identification of authentic workplace language needs and the development of communication competencies that meet those needs (Alzuoud & Gaudel, 2020). The question this framework raises for KSA higher education is whether English language instruction at

university level is adequately calibrated to produce graduates who can perform the communicative tasks their future employers require.

Existing research suggests that the answer, in many contexts, is no. A 2016 survey of 352 Saudi businesses found a significant shortage of workers with essential soft skills—of which communication, including English language communication, was prominently cited (Saudi Gazette, 2016). Englebert (1995) observed that employer expectations of workplace English literacy have expanded from basic print-based competencies to complex interpersonal communication across digital and multicultural settings. Yet university curricula in many Saudi institutions have been slower to adapt, maintaining a focus on grammatical accuracy and reading comprehension at the expense of the oral, interactive, and professionally contextualised communication skills that employers now prioritise.

This study seeks to bridge this knowledge gap by systematically examining the perceptions of both employers and fresh graduates regarding English language employability skills in the KSA job market. It addresses four research questions: (1) To what extent do KSA university students perceive a gap between the skills acquired through tertiary education and the requirements of the current job market? (2) What additional English language competencies do graduates need beyond theoretical knowledge, and how can these be cultivated curricularly? (3) How do KSA students perceive the role of English in preparing them for meaningful employment? (4) What is the relationship between students' learning experiences and their vocational readiness? By generating empirical, stakeholder-informed answers to these questions, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on ESP, graduate employability, and higher education reform in the Arab Gulf region.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Defining English Language Employability Skills

Employability skills are broadly defined as the constellation of competencies, attributes, and dispositions that enable graduates to secure employment, perform effectively in their roles, and progress within their careers (Suleman, Videira & Araújo, 2021). Knight and Yorke (2003, p. 8) offer a widely cited formulation: "a set of achievements—skills, understandings and personal attributes—that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations." Within this constellation, English language skills occupy a distinctive position: they are simultaneously a specific technical competency and the medium through which virtually all other employability skills—teamwork, presentation, problem-solving, and professional networking—are demonstrated in internationally engaged workplaces.

The question of what constitutes a sufficient level of English language proficiency for employment is, however, inherently contested. As Suleman et al. (2021) observe, the concept resists standardisation: different employers, sectors, and roles demand different configurations of reading, writing, speaking, and listening competencies. Nghia, Anh, and Kien (2023) argue for a theoretically grounded framework that distinguishes between communicative language competence, interactional competence, and professional discourse competence, each of which maps onto distinct workplace communication tasks and therefore implies different instructional priorities. Without such a framework, language preparation programmes risk being either over-generalised or under-specified in relation to the genuine demands of the labour market.

### 2.2 Employer Expectations and Student Perceptions: Evidence from the Literature

Research consistently documents a gap between employer expectations and graduate English language competencies. In Singapore, an Institute of Technical Education study of 350 employers found that language and grammar were identified as the areas most in need of improvement in graduate candidates, with employers emphasising the need for students to achieve a functional level of proficiency before entering the workforce (Saad & Majid, 2014). In KSA specifically, Alharbi (2022) found that business English learners expressed awareness of the importance of English for their careers but reported significant gaps in confidence and practical communicative ability, particularly in professional speaking and business writing contexts.

Kelly and McKay (2012) found that students tend to attribute success in language courses to the development of broader academic skills rather than specifically linguistic capabilities, and that their self-assessments of proficiency are frequently misaligned with their actual performance. This "mercantile" view of language—treating English as instrumental currency rather than a developmental competency—may partly account for the persistent gap between students' perceived readiness and employers' assessments of their preparedness. Qizi (2020) and Herbert et al. (2020) further document that soft skills including communication are among the most frequently cited deficits in graduate

recruits across diverse national contexts, suggesting that the KSA experience reflects a broader global pattern rather than a locally idiosyncratic one.

### 2.3 Workplace Literacy and the ESP Framework

O'Keeffe (2014) argues that the emerging sub-discipline of "English for the Workplace" draws on genre theory and sociolinguistic approaches to ground language instruction in the authentic communicative practices of professional environments. This perspective challenges the "instrumental workplace literacy" model critiqued by Braito (2009), which reduces English language competence to a finite set of reproducible skills modelled on industrial-era task performance. In the contemporary knowledge economy, workplace communication is characterised by improvisation, negotiation, and collaborative meaning-making—capacities that require not just linguistic accuracy but interactional fluency and cultural competence.

This shift has significant implications for curriculum design. Englebert (1995) argues that the move from traditional to new workplace literacies—including digital communication, cross-cultural collaboration, and knowledge generation—demands a corresponding evolution in what ESP courses teach and how they teach it. Lee (2007) and Kang (2007) add that students whose primary language practices differ from standard English conventions face compounded barriers, as the emotional reality of operating in a second language imposes additional cognitive and affective burdens that conventional grammar-focused instruction does not address. Androutsopoulos (2018) similarly foregrounds the multilingual and multimodal dimensions of contemporary workplace communication that most ESP curricula have yet to integrate.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. Cross-sectional surveys are appropriate for capturing a synchronic snapshot of attitudes, perceptions, and self-reported practices within a defined population at a specific point in time, enabling systematic comparison across participant groups (Creswell, 2014). This design was selected because the primary objectives of the study—to document and compare the perceptions of employers and fresh graduates regarding English language employability skills—are descriptive and comparative in nature, requiring structured, statistically analysable data rather than longitudinal tracking or experimental manipulation.

### 3.2 Participants

Two distinct participant cohorts were recruited for the study. The employer cohort comprised HR professionals and managers aged 30–47 with English proficiency levels of B2 (upper-intermediate) or C1 (advanced). This age range was selected to ensure that participants possessed sufficient professional experience to assess candidates' English language competencies reliably. The graduate cohort comprised fresh university graduates aged 18–30, representing a range of English proficiency levels from A2 (elementary) to C1 (advanced) and drawn from diverse disciplinary backgrounds including English language and literature, business administration, computer science, health sciences, and engineering. The inclusion of participants across proficiency levels was intentional, enabling the study to capture the full spectrum of graduate experience rather than focusing exclusively on high-performing language learners.

### 3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Separate structured questionnaires were developed for each participant group. The employer questionnaire investigated: the perceived importance of English language skills in hiring decisions; assessments of recent graduates' English proficiency; methods used to evaluate candidates' English during recruitment (including oral interviews, conversational proficiency evaluations, and written tests); challenges encountered with employees' English language performance; and views on the role of universities in preparing graduates linguistically for the workplace. The graduate questionnaire explored: self-assessed English language proficiency across the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening); perceptions of the importance of English for employment; experiences of language challenges during studies; and recommendations for improving English language preparation at university level. Both instruments combined Likert-scale items (1–5 agreement or importance ratings) with closed-ended categorical items and open-ended qualitative questions. The questionnaires were validated by two subject specialists and translated into Arabic to maximise accessibility and response authenticity. In addition, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with three employers representing a health education company, a hospital, and a hospital emergency department, providing richer contextual elaboration of the quantitative survey findings.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics—including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations—were computed for all Likert-scale and categorical items. These statistics were used to characterise the distribution of responses within each participant group and to identify patterns of agreement and divergence between employer and graduate perceptions. Employer interview data were transcribed and subjected to thematic content analysis, with recurring themes identified through iterative reading and coded manually. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data was achieved through a convergent synthesis approach, in which interview themes were used to contextualise and elaborate the survey findings.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Employer Perceptions of English Language Employability Skills

A substantial majority of employers in this study rated English language skills as either "Very Important" or "Extremely Important" for securing employment in their organisations. This result is consistent across industrial sectors, including healthcare, education, finance, and business services, suggesting that the premium placed on English proficiency is not sector-specific but reflects a broad structural feature of the KSA professional labour market. Employer assessments of the English language proficiency of recent graduates, however, were more varied: while some employers rated graduate applicants' skills as "Good" or "Very Good," a significant proportion rated them as "Fair" or "Poor," indicating a persistent gap between employer expectations and the language competencies that graduates bring to the recruitment process.

The most commonly used methods for assessing candidates' English language proficiency during recruitment were oral interviews, conversational proficiency evaluations, and written tests or assessments. This methodological range reflects the multi-dimensional nature of workplace English demands: employers are concerned not only with candidates' ability to produce grammatically accurate written text but with their capacity to communicate fluently and appropriately in real-time spoken interactions. The predominance of oral assessment methods is particularly noteworthy given that speaking and pronunciation emerged as one of the most commonly cited areas of weakness in graduate candidates, alongside writing and grammar and overall business communication skills.

A striking finding from the employer data was the perception that universities do not adequately prepare graduates with the English language skills required by the job market. Employers called for the introduction of more practical English courses, greater emphasis on business communication and professional discourse, and expanded opportunities for real-world language practice within university programmes. Several employers noted a positive correlation between employees' English language proficiency and their job performance and rate of career advancement, reinforcing the stakes of the current preparation gap.

### 4.2 Employer Interview Data

The qualitative interview data provided rich elaboration of these quantitative patterns. All three employer interviewees—drawn from a health education company, a hospital, and a hospital emergency department—converged on the view that English fluency is an indispensable professional asset in contemporary KSA workplaces. The employer from Afaq Health Education Company identified five core professional capacities enhanced by English fluency: communication skills (the ability to convey ideas and negotiate professionally), interpersonal skills (facilitating relationships across cultural contexts), presentation skills (pitching, reporting, and leading meetings in English), research and information access (leveraging English-language professional literature and resources), and networking abilities (building professional relationships internationally). The hospital employer similarly emphasised that English proficiency enables access to a broader range of job opportunities, both domestically and internationally, and that the language functions as a practical prerequisite for effective cross-departmental and cross-institutional communication in healthcare settings characterised by multinational workforces.

The emergency department employer added a broader cultural and developmental dimension to these observations, noting that English proficiency not only facilitates access to global knowledge and professional literature but also develops learners' cognitive flexibility and cross-cultural communicative repertoire. Across all three interviews, a consistent theme emerged: effective English communication in the workplace is not primarily about grammatical correctness but about the capacity to engage authentically, confidently, and interactively with professional interlocutors in a variety of spoken and written registers.

### 4.3 Graduate Perceptions and Practices

Fresh graduates in this study demonstrated a more ambivalent and internally differentiated relationship to English language employability skills than the employer data might suggest. While the majority acknowledged the general importance of English for securing employment, their self-assessed proficiency levels varied substantially across the four language skills, with speaking and listening frequently rated lower than reading and writing—a pattern consistent with the broader literature on EFL learner profiles (Koda, 2005). Several graduates identified specific challenges they had encountered during their studies, including limited opportunities for authentic spoken English practice, insufficient exposure to professional business discourse genres, and a lack of confidence in professional communication settings.

When asked to identify the English language skills they considered most critical for employability, graduates most frequently cited conversational proficiency, business communication, and professional writing. This self-diagnosis is broadly consistent with employer assessments, though graduates tended to underestimate the degree to which their current proficiency fell below employer expectations. This gap in self-awareness constitutes a significant challenge for career readiness preparation, as graduates who overestimate their proficiency are less likely to seek out additional language development opportunities voluntarily.

In terms of strategies for improving their English language skills, graduates identified participation in language exchange programmes, access to authentic language learning materials, cultural immersion activities, and the integration of more practical English courses into university curricula as the most valued and desired forms of support. A notable proportion also mentioned digital resources—including online platforms, English-language media, and AI-assisted language tools—as potentially valuable supplements to formal instruction. These responses suggest that graduates are actively motivated to improve their English language competencies but lack the structured institutional support needed to translate that motivation into sustained proficiency development.

### 4.4 Cross-Sector Comparison

A comparison of employer perceptions across industrial sectors reveals that, while the consensus on English language importance is near-universal, the specific competencies prioritised differ somewhat by sector. Employers in healthcare and education placed particular emphasis on professional communication skills—including the ability to explain complex information clearly, interact sensitively with patients or students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, and produce accurate written documentation. Employers in business and finance sectors additionally emphasised business writing, email communication, and the ability to conduct and participate in professional meetings in English. Across all sectors, however, conversational fluency and the ability to communicate appropriately in informal professional interactions were consistently foregrounded, suggesting that an overly formal or examination-oriented approach to English instruction may systematically under-prepare graduates for the interactional demands of workplace communication.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and extend the existing literature on the English language employability gap in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) higher education contexts. The near-universal consensus among employers on the importance of English language skills—combined with their consistent rating of graduate proficiency as inadequate—mirrors findings reported by Alharbi (2022), Saad and Majid (2014), and Herbert et al. (2020) across comparable international contexts. What distinguishes the KSA case, however, is the structural urgency added by Vision 2030: as the kingdom pursues its ambitious programme of economic diversification and Saudisation of the private sector workforce, the English language proficiency of national graduates becomes directly implicated in national economic strategy.

The discrepancy between graduate self-assessments and employer evaluations documented in this study is theoretically significant. Kelly and McKay's (2012) observation that students hold a "mercantile" view of language skills—valuing them instrumentally rather than developing them intrinsically—helps explain why graduates may acknowledge English's importance without undertaking the sustained developmental engagement necessary to achieve professional competency. This finding has direct implications for pedagogical practice: language instruction that frames English proficiency as a destination to be reached rather than a capacity to be continually developed may inadvertently reinforce the complacency documented here.

The prominence of speaking and pronunciation as areas of employer concern, despite graduates' own prioritisation of conversational proficiency as a career-relevant skill, points to a structural deficiency in how oral English is taught and assessed in KSA higher education. Research by Braito (2009) and O'Keeffe (2014) suggests that curricula built

around written grammar and reading comprehension—the legacy of print-based literacy paradigms—may systematically neglect the interactive, multimodal dimensions of contemporary professional communication. Employer interview data from this study strongly reinforce this diagnosis: all three employer interviewees identified real-time spoken communication as the primary medium of professional interaction, and all three identified deficiencies in graduates' oral communicative competence as the most significant barrier to their workplace effectiveness.

The graduates' identification of language exchange programmes, authentic materials, and cultural immersion as desired forms of support aligns with Berardo's (2006) findings on the motivational and comprehension benefits of authentic reading and listening materials, and with Gilmore's (2007) argument that authentic input is a prerequisite for developing the interactional fluency that workplace communication demands. The emergence of AI tools and digital platforms in graduate responses reflects an evolving landscape of self-directed language learning that higher education institutions have yet to integrate systematically into their provision. Responsible and structured integration of these technologies—alongside, rather than instead of, human interaction—may offer a scalable pathway to expanding English language practice beyond the constrained space of formal instruction.

## **6. Recommendations**

### **6.1 Comprehensive Curriculum Reform**

Universities should undertake a systematic review of their English language curricula to ensure that professional communication competencies—including business writing, oral presentation, workplace conversation, and cross-cultural interaction—are embedded as explicit learning outcomes across all programmes, not only in dedicated English language courses. This reform should be informed by regular consultation with industry partners to maintain alignment between curricular content and evolving workplace language demands. Internship programmes, industry placement modules, and real-world project-based assessments can provide students with authentic opportunities to develop and demonstrate professional English communication skills in contextually realistic settings.

### **6.2 Industry–Academia Collaboration**

Formal partnerships between universities and industry stakeholders should be established to co-design language training programmes tailored to sector-specific communication requirements. Such collaborations might include guest speaker series featuring professional practitioners, joint development of case-study materials based on real workplace scenarios, and employer participation in language skills assessment. This model of collaborative curriculum development not only ensures pedagogical relevance but signals to students that the English language competencies developed in university are directly transferable to the professional contexts they will shortly inhabit.

### **6.3 Faculty Professional Development**

The effectiveness of any curriculum reform is contingent on the capacity of teaching faculty to implement it. Universities should invest in professional development programmes that equip English language instructors with current knowledge of workplace communication demands, innovative communicative language teaching methodologies, and strategies for integrating authentic materials and task-based learning into their courses. Faculty exchanges with industry partners and engagement with professional bodies such as TESOL International and the British Council can provide ongoing professional renewal and ensure that instructional practices keep pace with evolving workplace literacy demands.

### **6.4 Extracurricular and Self-Directed Language Development**

Universities should create structured extracurricular opportunities for English language development beyond the formal curriculum. English conversation clubs, peer language exchange programmes, debate societies, and professionally oriented writing workshops can provide low-stakes, high-frequency practice environments that build the interactional confidence graduates currently lack. Universities should also curate and recommend high-quality digital language learning resources—including corpus-based vocabulary tools, professional podcast archives, and AI-assisted writing feedback platforms—and provide guidance on how to use them strategically rather than sporadically.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has provided empirical evidence of a significant and consequential gap between the English language employability skills that KSA employers require and those that fresh graduates currently possess. Employer data reveal near-universal recognition of English proficiency as a critical hiring criterion, paired with widespread dissatisfaction with the language competencies of recent graduates—particularly in the domains of spoken communication, professional writing, and business interaction. Graduate data reveal an awareness of English's importance that is not consistently matched by the proficiency development or strategic self-improvement necessary to meet employer expectations.

The study's findings have direct implications for KSA higher education policy at a moment when Vision 2030 has placed the competitiveness of the national workforce at the centre of the kingdom's development agenda. If universities are to fulfil their role in producing graduates capable of contributing to that agenda, they must reconceive English language instruction as a core professional preparation function rather than a peripheral linguistic service. This reconception requires curriculum reform, industry collaboration, faculty development, and the creation of authentic, communicatively rich learning environments that prepare graduates not merely to pass language assessments but to perform confidently and competently in the English-mediated professional interactions that await them in the KSA job market.

Future research should pursue longitudinal designs to track the English language development trajectories of graduates from entry into higher education through their first years of employment, enabling more precise identification of the points at which language provision is most critical and most deficient. Qualitative studies that give deeper voice to both employer and graduate perspectives, including those of graduates who have successfully navigated the language demands of professional employment, could yield actionable pedagogical insights that survey data alone cannot provide. Comparative research across GCC universities would further illuminate whether the patterns documented here are specific to the KSA context or reflect a regional challenge requiring coordinated policy responses.

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