

Employers' Requirements for English-Majored Students: A Case Study from Vietnam

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Abstract

Graduate employability patterns seem to have changed worldwide while companies and organizations are shrinking their workforce under unstable and unpredictable economies. The decision to recruit a graduate of employers depends on their qualities and competencies, in addition to discipline-specific skills and knowledge. Therefore, graduates from English majors have to encounter harsh competition not only with their fellows but also with students from other majors. Within that context, this study explores what employers require for English-majored graduates. Using descriptive statistics, the authors designed a five-point Likert scale questionnaire based on the content analysis of 34 job positions for English-majored graduates available on three popular websites for Vietnamese job seekers from June 2018 to May 2019. Participants decided their level of meeting different requirements of employers that were listed as various items in the questionnaire. Results from the survey with 160 participants show that many graduates do not possess the employment attributes that employers are seeking. Consequently, measures should be taken from the university level to better enhance students' employability in the future.

Keywords: Graduate employability, employability attributes, English majors

1. Introduction

In order to help their students to successfully respond to the requirements of the industry in terms of skills and knowledge, universities worldwide need to understand the graduate employability (GE) from the perspectives of two important stakeholders involved – employers and graduates. The concept of graduate employability is becoming more and more popular in higher education all over the world. Brown, Hesketh, and Williams (cited in Tomlinson, 2008) claim that employers are involved in employment discourse to performative and organizational capabilities, behavioral competence, and a more comprehensive range of individuals. Within that context, students and universities globally have recognized the changing nature of employability patterns and are trying to incorporate employability attributes in degree program provision (Cai, 2013). Such awareness has inspired research to determine which employers seek employability attributes (EAs) in different contexts. Also, many key stakeholders, such as universities, employers, and governments, have approached graduate employability from a human capital perspective (Kalfa & Taksa, 2015) as it is assumed that the acquisition of specific skills and abilities will lead to enhanced gradueness and, ultimately, graduate-level employment (Clarke, 2018).

Various researchers and institutions have defined the term *employability* differently. For some, employability is the student's ability to gain and maintain a job after graduation. In this respect, Hillage and Pollard (1998) define employability as a student's "capacity to gain initial employment, maintain employment, and obtain employment if required" (p. 2). In the same vein, Yorke (2010) defines it as the capacity of a graduate who can find and retain a graduate-level job and transfer between jobs if they are forced or want to. For others, employability is referred to as the skills, knowledge, attributes, or understandings of the graduates. Some typical definitions in this sense include those by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia (2002), Moreland (2006), Yorke (2006), and Shury, Winterbotham, Davies, and Oldfield (2009). Among these, the definition by Yorke (2006) seems to be the most comprehensive to the content of the current study. According to this author, employability is

A set of achievement - skills, understandings, and personal attributes –makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy (p. 8).

In literature, graduate attributes are variously referred to as crucial skills (Drew, Thorpe, & Bannister, 2002), generic attributes (The Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), 1996), key

competencies (Australian Education Council, 1993), transferable skills (Assiter, 1995), employability skills, and soft skills (Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council [BIHECC], 2007).

In the context of a rapidly updating information, employees have to not only possess and develop knowledge and skills directly relating to their discipline or job positions but also gain some 'generic' attributes that can be transferable to many other career situations and areas (Bridgstock, 2009). These generic skills are defined as 'those transferable skills essential for employability at some level for most' (Kearns, 2001, p. 2). Generic skills have also been known as 'core skills,' 'key competencies,' 'transferable skills,' or 'underpinning skills' (Australian Education Council, 1993).

Recently, there is an oversupply of graduates from many disciplines (Piróg, 2016; Tomlinson, 2012) since higher education worldwide has been massified. Therefore, in certain countries, gaining a university qualification is regarded as evidence of GA development, while in the others, strategies need to be implemented to develop these GA. For instance, Denmark applies the Danish Qualifications Framework, which asks for a competence profile in their research-oriented bachelor's and master's courses. On the contrary, Australia generally accepts graduate attributes that universities develop in their graduates. Meanwhile, the United States and Canada require work-based and work-related learning and portfolios for emphasizing graduate attributes (Harvey & Bowers-Brown, 2004).

In Vietnam, employers' concerns about graduate employability attributes have recently been noticed (Hager & Holland, 2006; Tran & Swierczek, 2009; OECD, 2012). Different stakeholders, especially employers, claim that graduate students do not fully possess the types of GE attributes needed for the workplace. According to Marope (2006), there is a general impression that most employers are dissatisfied with the quality of higher education (HE) output. This observation is following the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2012), which states that university graduate students are often not adequately prepared for work, and the training is not relevant to the demands of the workplace. This organization also emphasizes that up to 60% of Vietnamese graduate students cannot secure occupation. Moreover, of those employed, many need to be re-trained or even do not work in areas of their major. Referring to HE, Tran and Swierczek (2009) have also identified an important challenge for developing human resources in Vietnam. That is, there is not enough attention to the development of GE attributes in the country, which has indeed negatively affected how university graduate students have prepared for high-skilled jobs.

Along with the tendency of mass HE, HE institutions are now tied to the economy and the society (European Commission, 2003, 2005, 2011). For example, the UK government has put more pressure on its HE system to change in a way to promote outputs, quality, and the responsiveness to the job market of the graduates (Department for Education, 2010). HE institutions are expected to prepare their graduates to be ready and able to adapt to their working environment (Cable, 2010). In the same vein, in South East Asia, universities are struggling to take on-board employability. Clear evidence for this is the framework designed by the ASEAN University Network (AUN) that requires member universities to cooperate with employers in various activities such as developing the curriculum, designing the syllabus, and preparing them for the employment process. The focus on employment outcomes (such as the ratio of graduates being employed after graduating for one year) in the framework urges universities to consider the employers' requirements whenever implementing their academic practices.

Being a member of the AUN, the university being investigated also has significant concerns over the employability of its students. For the English-major students graduating from English Language Studies program, the concern is of a higher level as compared to those from English Teaching Pedagogy and English Translation and Interpretation. While graduates in the two latter fields have clear career objectives of being English teachers, translators, or interpreters, those from the former are supposed to work in different positions in enterprises, state departments, or governmental and non-governmental organizations. Many graduates from English Language Studies feel they can do almost anything but, in fact, nothing because they do not have as much field-specific knowledge and skill as the others. A similar situation can also be seen from many other universities that provide the bachelor program of English Language Studies in Vietnam. Therefore, a study on these students' capacity and preparation to meet employers' demands are of crucial importance. That is the gap that the current study is trying to fill.

The current study was conducted to answer the two research questions as follows:

1. What attributes do employers require from students graduating from English majored programs?
2. To what extent do the student participants possess these attributes?

2. Objectives

This study investigates the employability attributes that employers require for bachelor graduates of English majored programs in a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Also, it explores the extent Vietnamese students met these requirements.

3. Materials and Methods

Participants of the current study are 160 students (38 males, 122 females) of English Language Studies. At the time of the study, 43 of them graduated from the program for two months, 75 were four-year students, and 42 were third-year ones. The average age of these students was 21 years old.

The study has been conducted through several steps. First of all, we screened through the three most popular websites for job hunters in Vietnam, namely timviecnhanh.com, vn.indeed.com, and vietnamworks.com with the keywords “chuyên ngành tiếng Anh” (English specialization), “Ngôn ngữ Anh” (English Language), and “tốt nghiệp đại học ngoại ngữ” (graduating from foreign language universities). The searches were conducted by the end of June 2018 and limited to job vacancies posted on the three websites from then to the end of May 2019. After one week, we collected 34 job positions that employ students graduating from English majored programs. Among these job vacancies, English teachers, interpreters, and translators are the most popular positions being recruited. The companies posting these vacancies are in various industry groups, including education, hospitality, and translations. Employers’ requirements for these 34 job positions were then picked out for content analyses. The requirements posed by at least three employers were then turned into items in a questionnaire. The questionnaire was then piloted with three lecturers and ten students of English majors to check for their clarity and validity. After some items have been revised to be more understandable and valid to respondents, the questionnaire was transformed into an online Google Form for the convenience of collecting data. The link of the questionnaire was sent to the e-mail addresses and Facebook Messenger of 240 students of English Language Studies at the university being researched. After two weeks, 160 responses were collected (response rate of 67 %). The data were then coded and input into the SPSS software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), version 20 for analyses. The result of the reliability test revealed that the questionnaire was reliable for further data analysis with the Cronbach alpha of 0.79.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 5 sections. Sections 1 to 4 investigate students’ level of meeting employers’ requirements in English proficiency and English used for work, soft skills, working perceptions and attitudes, and other requirements, respectively. Section 5 asks for students’ demographic information and their job-related experiences.

More specifically, Section 1 of the questionnaire consisted of 5 questions. The first question requires the students to evaluate their English proficiency and English for works on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 for ‘Completely wrong with me’ and 5 for ‘Completely right with me.’ The next four questions asked if the students had taken an English proficiency test, types of tests taken, time taking the test, and English level stated in the test according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Section 2 includes seven items that focus on students’ possession of soft skills. Students were required to choose one of the 5-point Likert scales with 1 for Weak and 5 for Very good. These items explore the seven soft skills of communication, convincing others, oral presentation, and public speaking, negotiation, cooperating and working in groups, independent working, and time management and work planning.

Section 3 focuses on students’ working perceptions and attitudes and consists of 8 items. These items ask students about different perceptions and attitudes toward jobs.

Section 4 explores students’ capacity to meet other requirements. These items range from computer-use skills to the ability to travel on short or long business trips.

4. Results and Discussion

Employers' requirements for job applicants graduating from English Language Studies Programs

Employers require four groups of attributes of graduates from English Language Studies in Vietnam. The first group of requirements is a set of English language skills, as in Table 1. Seven attributes were found in this group. Among them, possessing a certificate of IELTS 5.5, TOEIC 550, TOEFL iBT, or B2 and above is required by 11 employers. The second important attribute of this group is somehow similar to the first when it requires graduates to listen, speak, read, and write well in English. High English proficiency levels and good English pronunciation are required equally by six employers. Meanwhile, spontaneous interpretation capacity is required by three employers, and the ability to differentiate between British and American English and the ability to describe vocal descriptions with illustrating examples are each required by one employer.

Table 1 Employers' requirements of English proficiency and English used for work

Requirement	Positions having such requirements
Possessing a certificate of IELTS 5.5, TOEIC 550, TOEFL iBT, or B2 and above	12
Listening, speaking, reading, and writing English well	11
High English proficiency	7
Good English pronunciation	6
Spontaneous interpretation capacity	3
Ability to differentiate between British and American English	1
Ability to describe vocal descriptions with illustrating examples	1

Table 2 below reveals the second group of requirements, which are classified as soft skill attributes. Skills of communicating and convincing others are the two most essential skills required equally by 13 employers. The two-second critical soft skills required by nine employers are cooperating and working in groups, and working independently. The three last skills required by eight different employers are skills of oral presentation and public speaking, negotiation, and time management, and work planning.

Table 2 Employers' requirements of soft skills

Requirement	Positions having such requirements
Communication	13
Convincing others	13
Cooperating and working in groups	9
Independent working	9
Oral presentation and public speaking	8
Negotiation	8
Time management and work planning	8

Besides English language and soft skill requirements, employers also request students to possess somewhat positive perceptions and attitudes toward occupations, as listed in Table 3. Being quick, enthusiastic, and honest is required by 14 different employers and can be considered the most crucial attribute in this group. Being ranked the second are three attributes of ability to work under pressure, high discipline and working attitudes, and being creative and flexible at work with the eight employers' requirements. The other attributes in this group include being self-confident and not afraid of challenges (each required by eight employers), having logical and critical thinking, ambitiousness, and willingness to participate in training courses (each required by three employers).

Table 3 Employers' requirements of work perceptions and attitudes

Requirement	Positions having such requirements
Being quick, enthusiastic, and honest	14
Ability to work under pressure	8
High discipline and working attitudes	8
Being creative and flexible at work	8
Being self-confident and not afraid of challenges	4
Logical and critical thinking	3
Ambitiousness	3
Willingness to participate in training courses	3

Other requirements are also posed by employers and listed in Table 4. Among them, good computer skills are required by 15 different employers and ranked the most critical attribute. Other attributes required by 3 to 6 employers are abilities to analyze, synthesize data and write reports, good appearance and voice, willingness for business traveling, and the possibility to work for the company for a long time.

Table 4 Employers' other requirements

Requirement	Positions having such requirements
Good computer skills	15
Company loyalty	6
Willingness for business traveling	5
Good appearance and voice	3
Abilities to analyze, synthesize data and write reports	3
Ability to find clients using the Internet tool	1
Social understanding	1
Taking initiatives at work	1
Being efficient and meeting deadlines	1

The findings to the first research question revealed that similar to many other employers worldwide, the employers of English Language Studies graduates require them to have critical skills (Drew, Thorpe, & Bannister, 2002). In this case, the skill of using the English language in Table 1; employability skills, and soft skills (Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council [BIHECC], 2007) as listed in Table 2 and 4, and critical competencies (Australian Education Council, 1993) as listed in Table 4.

The findings also echo with Bridgstock's (2009) idea that within the area of rapidly changing information and knowledge-intensive economy, workers have to not only maintain and develop knowledge and skills in their field but must also possess 'generic' attributes that can be applied to other job situations and areas.

The extent students of English majors meet employers' requirements

English proficiency and English used for work

Student participants' attributes of the English language are listed in Table 5. In general, students in the current study did not have high efficacy of their English language competence. It can be seen that less than 60% of student participants ticked the columns of 'Right' and 'Completely right of me' in the items that asked them to evaluate their listening, speaking, writing, and all four skills together. Students showed to be more confident with their reading skills than the others, possibly resulting from their long habit of learning reading and grammar accumulated from secondary high school and their less investment in productive language skills such as speaking and writing.

Table 5 Student participants' attributes of English language competence

Requirements of English proficiency and English used for work	Completely wrong of me (%)	Wrong of me (%)	Neutral (%)	Right of me (%)	Completely right of me (%)
I have good listening skills in English.	1.3	7.5	36.9	6.3	8.1
I have good speaking skills in English.	0.6	5.6	37.5	48.1	8.1
I have good reading skills in English.	1.3	2.5	20.6	64.4	11.3
I have good writing skills in English	0.6	5.0	36.9	51.9	5.6
In general, I am good at all four skills of English	1.9	11.3	30.0	53.1	3.8
I can listen and interpret languages spontaneously.	5.6	16.3	48.8	25.6	3.8
I have good English pronunciation skills.	1.3	6.9	33.1	47.5	11.3

Table 5 also reveals that less than 60% of student participants thought they are good at English pronunciation. Much less proportion of students was able to listen and interpret languages spontaneously, as required by employers.

Tables 6 and 7 below partly explain the findings in Table 5. Only 32.1% of participants have ever taken a standardized test of IELTS, TOEIC, or VSTEP, and only 14.4% possessed an English level of C1 and above. Meanwhile, the Vietnam National Competency Framework issued, according to Decision 1982/QĐ-TTg on October 18, 2016, regulated that students graduating from English-majored programs must have level 5 of the National Foreign Language Framework (equivalent to level C1 of Common European Framework of References for Languages – CEFR).

Table 6 Student participants' English proficiency tests taken

Type of Standardized Tests Taken	No. of students	Percentage (%)
IELTS	11	6.9
TOEIC	20	12.6
VSTEP	20	12.6
Other	40	25.0
No test has been taken yet	69	42.9

In other words, the English proficiency level of student participants in the current study does not meet the standard of the national graduate attributes. However, since most of them are undergraduate students, there can be a possibility that they will be able to reach the language target by the time they graduate from university.

Table 7 Student participants' English proficiency level according to tests

English Proficiency According to Standardized Tests	No. of students	Percentage (%)
B1	33	20.6
B2	35	21.9
C1	20	12.5
C2	3	1.9

Soft skills

Among the seven soft skills required by employers, the participants are the most confident with their skills of cooperating and working in groups and skills of working independently (Items 5 and 6 in Table 7). Ranked the second in the list are their skills of time management and work planning. It can be the result of the changing of teaching methodology within the institution in the past decade in the direction of boosting students' learning autonomy and cooperation. Besides, the credit-based system at the institution may have also contributed to students' capacity to plan their study and manage their time.

Table 8 Student participants' attributes of soft skills

Attribute	Weak (%)	Average (%)	Fairly good (%)	Good (%)	Very good (%)
My communication skill is ...	0.6	11.3	46.3	34.4	7.5
My skill in convincing others is ...	1.9	18.8	45.6	26.9	6.9
My oral presentation and public speaking skill is ...	0.0	16.9	48.1	29.4	5.6
My negotiation skill is ...	4.4	20.0	51.9	20.0	3.8
My skills in cooperating and working in groups is ...	0.6	5.0	29.4	53.1	11.9
My skill of working independently is ...	0.0	5.6	21.3	50.6	22.5
My skills in time management and work planning is ...	0.0	8.8	31.3	45.6	14.4

On the contrary of the researchers' expectations toward the student participants' skills of communicating, convincing others, negotiating and oral presentation, and public speaking, only 23.8 to 41.9% ranked themselves as good and very good. These findings may result from the fact that students have not been created with favorable conditions to practice these skills during their class hours and outside the classrooms.

Perceptions and attitudes

Table 9 reveals a brighter side of the whole picture when from 70 to more than 90% of the respondents evaluate themselves as having good perceptions and attitudes toward their prospective occupations.

Table 9 Student participants' attributes of perceptions and attitudes

Attribute	Completely wrong of me (%)	Wrong of me (%)	Neutral (%)	Right of me (%)	Completely right of me (%)
I am quick, enthusiastic, and honest.	0.6	5.6	24.4	55.6	13.8
I am able to work under pressure.	0.0	0.6	6.3	58.1	35.0
I have high discipline and good working attitudes.	0.0	0.6	6.9	60.0	32.5
I am creative and flexible at work.	0.6	0.6	31.9	53.1	13.8
I am self-confident and not afraid of challenges.	0.0	2.5	31.9	50.6	15.0
I have logical and critical thinking.	0.6	1.3	6.9	52.5	38.8
I am ambitious at work.	0.0	1.9	10.0	61.9	26.3
I am willing to participate in training courses		0.6	5.6	57.5	36.3

These findings show that when it comes to future jobs, students have a high readiness level and commitment to adapt to the working environment. It is of crucial importance because, according to Hillage and Pollard (1998), employability is the "capacity to gain initial employment, maintain employment, and obtain employment if required" (p. 2).

Other requirements

Similar to findings on the attributes of perception and attitudes toward future jobs, most of the respondents in the current study also show that they have been prepared and committed for future jobs. Table 10 reveals that more than two-thirds of the respondents can use common office software skillfully. It can be because students have been highly aware of the importance of computer literacy not only at school but also at work. Also, students will be exempted from the courses of Basic Informatics in the study program if they gain an official certificate of computer use. Many students have invested time in attaining the certificate because they know that it will be useful for their future job-seeking.

Table 10 Student participants' attributes of other competences

Attribute	Completely wrong of me (%)	Wrong of me (%)	Neutral(%)	Right of me (%)	Completely right of me (%)
I am able to use the software of Word, Excel, PowerPoint skillfully.	0.6	5.6	28.1	50.0	15.6
I am able to travel for long or short business trips.	0.0	1.9	15.0	55.6	27.5
I have a good appearance and voice.	0.6	2.5	26.9	52.5	17.5
I am able to work for the company for a long time.	0.0	0.6	13.1	57.5	28.8
I am able to analyze, synthesize data and write reports	1.3	6.9	40.6	43.8	7.5

The respondents' high commitment for future jobs is also revealed in Items 2 and 4 in Table 9. They are willing to travel during the jobs and work for the company for a longer time.

5. Conclusion

The current study has been conducted to explore English-major students' level of meeting potential employers' requirements. Findings from the survey with 160 respondents revealed that the students have a higher level of meeting employers' requirements of working perceptions and attitude, as well as other competencies as compared to those of English language and soft skills. Since the participants came from 3 different groups of students, namely, new graduates, senior, and junior students, the data from newly graduated students can be different from the overall data. In other words, the graduates may have a higher level of meeting the employers' demands than the other two groups.

Despite that, some implications can still be suggested to the English Language Studies program in general. First, the HE institutes of English-major programs should develop strategies and faculty/departmental plans for improving the graduates' employability skills and attributes. The universities need to include the promotion of employability skills and attributes in various official documents such as their mission statements, learning and teaching strategies, course frameworks, strategic documents, and practical guidance. Second, the staff should be prompted to recognize that developing graduate employability skills and attributes go hand in hand with developing academic capacity and broader life skills. Lastly, there should be cooperation between the HE institutes and employers. For example, the students should be provided with the opportunities to access work-based learning when their HE institutions implement integrated placements, internships, and work-based learning opportunities into their training programs. In this way, both the HE institutions and employers will gain benefits. The universities can train their graduates to meet the employers' expectations, while the employers themselves can also recruit suitable applicants from the university without spending time and cost on training and re-training for jobs.

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