

# English for University Graduate Employability: *Students and Employers' Voices*

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**Abstract**—Currently, English has taken a more significant role in all domains of life and is always associated with globalization and industrialization. In Indonesia, the growing importance of English has created new purposes and needs for learning English mainly by university students. This also calls for a shift in the mindset of universities from nurturing graduates for local to the global market. This study investigated the voices of university students and employers on the need for English language proficiency and skills for employment. Data were collected through interviews with forty final year undergraduate students at a private university and five employers from hospitality, service, and trading companies in Indonesia. The results show that both parties agree that English plays a major role in employability. English is important for a job interview in multinational companies and communication in the workplace (corporate training, company meeting, and presentation). It also becomes one of the keys to engaging in international communities and very important people in industries. In addition, there is a general agreement among students that good speaking skills are very important. However, in trading and service industries, employers put a great emphasis on listening and reading, followed by speaking and writing skills while in hospitality industries speaking skills are considered the most important. This study suggested that university should design English syllabus which caters the students' needs to meet local and global industrial demands.

**Keywords:** *employers, employability, English, industry students*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century global workforce demands not only young and skilled human capital competent in technical skills, but also academic skills which prioritize the English language (Di Grapello, 2013; Di Grapello, Kruse, & Tandon, 2011; Hendarman, 2010). Recognizing this, an initiative through the National Education Blueprint for Smart and Competitive Indonesians 2005-2025 was introduced by the Indonesian government. The objective of the blueprint is to nurture smart and competitive Indonesians (*Insan Kamil/Paripurna*) who are qualified and relevant to the demands for global and local communities. The blueprint consists of four phases. Phase 1 (2005-2010) focuses on capacity improvement and modernization, phase 2 (2010-2015) prioritizes education services development, phase 3 (2015-2020) targets regional competitiveness, and phase 4 (2020-2025) aims for global competitiveness. As a consequence, this calls for a shift in mindset of higher education institutions in Indonesia from

nurturing graduates for local to global job market. Therefore, communicative skills, especially in English language, are highly emphasized in university levels (Ministry of National Education, Rencana Pendidikan Nasional Jangka Panjang 2005-2025, 2005).

Today, English has taken a more significant role in all domains of life. Learning English is always associated with globalization where the nation needs to perform on the global stage for the sake of the economy (Lauder, 2008; Rido, 2019). Hence, this changing role and the growing importance of English in Indonesia have created new purposes and needs for learning English mainly by young Indonesians who have previously learned English as a foreign language (EFL) for communication and academic purposes. Most of Indonesian universities require their students to sit for a paper-based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and achieve at least 450 (677 is the highest possible score). At this level, students are expected to be able to initiate and maintain predictable face-to-face conversations, demonstrate emerging but not consistent basic grammar, and read very simple English texts (intermediate proficiency).

In the Asian context, researches on English and graduate employability indicate that university students had awareness of the importance of English to secure employment as it is a lingua franca of international business communication. This matches the results of survey on employability skills based on employers' perspectives which claimed that good communication skills can increase employability and career promotion; it is a top skill. (Abdul Kadir, Noor, & Shakizah, 2015; Al-Mutairi, Naser, & Saeid, 2014; Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012; Ting, Marzuki, Chuah, Misieng, & Jerome, 2017). In the Indonesian context, studies on the incorporation of employability skills in the teaching-learning process in education institutions show that teachers were strongly confident about personal management and teamwork skills of their graduates; but this was not the case with the graduates' academic skills, especially the language skills (Afrianto & Gulö, 2019; Di Grapello, 2013; Di Grapello et al., 2011; Hendarman, 2010; Newhouse & Suryadarma, 2011). As these skills are required in the industrial revolution 4.0 professional practice (Di Grapello, 2013; Di Grapello et al., 2011; Freihart & Al-Machzoomi, 2012; Hendarman, 2010; Riemer, 2007), their poor language skills meant they will face challenges to meet industries demands for competent workers and this affected their employability in the global market (Afrianto & Gulö, 2019; Hendarman, 2010; Newhouse & Suryadarma, 2011).

This study is based on the premise that English language skills impact on university students' future career. In the 2008 Indonesia employer/employee survey of skills/labor demand and job vacancies involving 473 medium and large firms released by World Bank, it was reported that the Indonesian graduates' English communication skills were the weakest among other demanded skills like technical and computer skills (Di Grapello, 2013; Di Grapello et al., 2011; World Bank, 2008).

The present study is initiated in line with these concerns. Education institutions and educators commonly promote English as beneficial to future study and employability, but students and employers' perceptions of the importance of English are often not considered. It is important that their perceptions are heard as gaining better insights could allow more positive attitudes to both English and the industry being fostered. Thus, the aim of this study was to investigate students and employers' perceptions on the importance of English for university graduates. The research question is what are the voices of university students and employers on the need of English language proficiency and skills for employment?

## II. METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach. Data were performed through semi-structured interview with 40 final year undergraduate students at a private university and 5 employers from hospitality, service, and trading companies in Indonesia. In this study, interviews were used to collect data from the students and employers as they were asked questions to get verbal responses and obtain in-depth information about their perceptions of the importance of English for university graduate employability. The use of semi-structured interviews leaves space for the researcher to add any further questions that may arise during the actual interviews with participants. It generally involved asking a series of structured questions; then, it was probed using open-ended questions to obtain in-depth information. The interviews were conducted in English as most of the students and employers could understand the questions and give their response comfortably. Some interview sessions, on the other hand, were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia as some students and employers were more comfortable giving their responses in their mother tongue. The results of interview transcriptions were referred back to the students and employers for verification.

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of interviews with the students and employers show that both parties agree that English plays a major role for employability. English is important for a job interview in multinational companies and communication in workplace (corporate training, company meeting, and presentation). It also becomes one of the keys to engage with international communities and very important people in industries. Furthermore, the findings also reveal that there is a general agreement among students that good speaking skills are very important. However, employers, especially trading and service industries, put a great emphasis on listening and reading, followed by speaking and writing skills while in hospitality industries speaking skills are considered the most important.

### A. *The Voices of University Students*

The students believe that English proficiency and skills can be one of the factors to win a job interview. The students said that:

Extract 1:

Mmm...let's take some of my friend's experiences, aaa....my friends...my friend's major is English and they are becoming marketing officer, they are becoming broadcaster, becoming secretary and so it is...is...what...not only in the what...the field of English, but they can also be successful in other fields such is dealing with English ... and that's a plus point she can speak English fluently. That's why, then, the eloquent of **English speaking helps them to be accepted in some other companies**...as far as I see... **English is a password** let say, password in the future. ...you are going to be an engineer, whatever you are going to be, still, English is the first key word.

(Student 7)

Extract 2:

**I agree that English is my future investment.** With the collaboration with other skills it can help us **to make easy for us to get a job** and join with aaa...some companies. And if we go to other place (traveling), it would be easier for someone as well.

(Student 18)

Extract 3:

I think English is important for university students because if they graduate and apply for a job outside [oversea] there what they need to do is they have to be different from others. **I think English will make them different from others; English is an added value.**

(Student 19)

Extract 4:

**English hmmm.. will help us [university graduates] facing job's world,** but it must be supported by other skills like computer skills.

(Student 31)

Extract 5:

When we try to find a job, the first question will be 'can you speak English?' and when we say 'yes, I can', **it will be an advantage for us and I think I will get the job.**

(Student 35)

Extract 6:

**Mastering English increases my chance to get a good job** in a multinational company.

(Student 39)

Besides that, the students think that if they work for a multinational company, they will use English in daily basis with their colleagues in the office. They stated that:

(Student 19)

Extract 7:

I imagine myself work in a top company **with international co-workers**. My dream company...**I think will use English all the times**.... I study hard....

(Student 4)

Extract 8:

If I end up working for a good company...outside of Indonesia...I hope...my **English will be very useful...everyday language...I talk with them**... hmmm... technically because my friends are coming from different countries, also native-speaker of English...

(Student 15)

Extract 9:

There are possibilities...hmmm...aaa...my senior now work on a cruise...you know most of his friends on the ship are Filipinos...hmm...others are coming from South America and Europe...they, of, course, speak in English...I think...**if I work for an international company..hhmmm...like cruise ship or hotel, I can use my English everyday** I think...hehe...communicating my ideas to my boss or talking with my friends...I can't wait...

(Student 27)

Some of the students also believe that English can engage them with international communities. They uttered that:

Extract 10:

English is a must because everything in this world is related to English. **I want to go further..hhmm...meeting great people in industry.... English is important for us and also an international language....hmmm...to open the door.**

(Student 1)

Extract 11:

...I think English is inevitable nowadays because ya...anywhere, anytime, anyhow, we are with English....we have to deal with English and we have to.... nowadays in all industries... even in Indonesia. So, I guess it's **impossible avoiding English from our life, especially if we plan to deal with international communities.**

(Student 3)

Extract 12:

**English is also important if we want to go global,** you know...negotiation, making cooperation or signing agreement...**for international relationships...expanding business...**

Extract 13:

**English is important...the language of international communication...it's language of business...communicating with business people...internationally....**

(Student 39)

The results of the interview with the students also indicate that they think speaking is the most important skill compared to other skills. They asserted that:

Extract 14:

...hmmm... English language skills...speaking, reading, and listening... it's a compulsory. But I think, in this globalization **era communication skills in English are highly demanded by employers.**

(Student 2)

Extract 15:

I imagine that I present my ideas in front of my boss or my clients in the future. So, **I think I must have good speaking skills.**

(Student 21)

Extract 16:

**For me speaking is the most important skill.** Next is reading, writing...

(Student 33)

Extract 17:

In this digital era, **speaking...English communication skills...university graduates must prepare for that...people know that we are good in English when we speak...express our ideas and feelings...**

(Student 34)

### *B. The Voices of Employers*

The results of interview with employers show that English language skills are much needed in their companies as they target global market; therefore, they seek candidates who are competent, at least, in English. They stated that:

Extract 18:

**We require professionals who have good command in English** because this company has several branches overseas...our clients are mostly coming from Europe and Asia, especially Singapore and UK.

(Employer 1-trading)

Extract 19:

We think that **good English communication skills is the most important...you know it's the first impression during interview...**

(Employer 2-hospitality)

Extract 20:

...most of **documents are in English now...agreement, letters, we send email in English...so we need staff who have good ability in English...so to ease our jobs...**

(Employer 5-service)

Next, the employers explain that they use English in the office while working. In addition, they mention that for new employees, especially in trading and service industries, the most useful skills are listening and reading.

Extract 21:

...of course **everybody can speak...in internal meeting...during important meeting, the boss who normally speaks...negotiates...it's not easy...the rest just listens and takes notes...you know...read the materials...learn what's going on...what the boss...hmm..the company wants...**

(Employer 1-trading)

Extract 22:

When I was new [employee], my ex-boss asked me to **study a lot of business proposals and responded all questions from international clients via email.** After 3 years, they assigned me in bigger projects...

(Employer 3-trading)

Extract 23:

For new employees, **listening and reading the most important skills.** They will attend training sessions, get loads of works and instructions from their boss, communicate with other departments...you know... we provide services to our clients, **our staffs have to listen, comprehend everything... and write...hmm...follow-up reports...**

(Employer 5-service)

However, in hospitality industries, speaking are considered the most important skills.

Extract 25:

Because we work in this industry [hospitality], **we must have good communication skills...warm gestures,...hmm...attractive...you know our clients...we have to make them happy...come back.**

(Employer 2-hospitality)

Extract 26:

Here [in the company], everybody must be confident in **handling guests or handling complaints or**

**answering questions hmmm... taking care of the needs of our guests...It's all about services...to make our guests comfortable.**

(Employer 4-hospitality)

This study investigated the voices of university students and employers on the need for English language proficiency and skills for employment. From the findings it can be seen that both students and employers have similar voices on the importance of English for university graduate employability. It becomes one of the keys to secure job and to advance their career. Abdul Kadir and Wan Mohd Noor as well as Ranasinghe and Ranasinghe claim that most of university students are actually aware of the importance of English for their future employability even though the results of their English proficiency tests are mostly poor (Abdul Kadir et al., 2015; Ranasinghe, & Ranasinghe, 2012). Employers see that this poor English language proficiency and skills indicate their limited capacity to perform higher level job responsibilities which need an ability to interact with all sorts of people in various tasks (Ting et al., 2017). The tasks include attending technical training, making presentations, and engaging with multicultural/national people in industries (Al-Mutairi et al., 2014; Afrianto & Gulö, 2019; Freihat & Al-Machzumi, 2012; Ting et al., 2017). This becomes the concerns of many countries, especially in Asia, that future multinational companies and employers are not willing to recruit local university graduates because of their lack of confidence to communicate in English (Ting et al., 2017).

The findings of this study also show that both students and employers in hospitality industries highlight speaking as the most important skills. Meanwhile, employers from service and trading industries emphasize listening and reading skills. Employers in many companies still view candidates from their ability to speak. This ability is mainly needed by jobs which involve customer service, front liners, and marketing (hospitality and service industries) (Abdul Kadir et al., 2015; Al-Mutairi et al., 2014; Afrianto & Gulö, 2019; Ting et al., 2017). Therefore, candidates who come with great ideas, but poor English language skills will not be hired (Abdul Kadir et al., 2015; Ting et al., 2017). Furthermore, globally positioned shipping and trading companies need workers who have the skills to listen and mingle with people of all levels. If their skills are lacking, it will affect their self-esteem and compensate company performance, even though in many cases it does not override professional competence (Ting et al., 2017). Therefore, university graduate have to equip themselves with both knowledge and skills, including English language for better future employability.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, both parties—students and employers—realize the importance of English for university graduate employability, especially to win job interview and perform job. In addition, students and employers from service industries believe that speaking is the most important skills while employers from trading and service industries highlight listening and reading skills. The results of this study, in some extent, are similar to that of previous studies (Abdul Kadir et al., 2015; Al-Mutairi et al., 2014; Afrianto & Gulö, 2019; Di

Grapello, 2013; Di Grapello, et al., 2011; Freihat & Al-Machzoomi, 2012; Hendarman, 2010; Newhouse & Suryadarma, 2011; Ranasinghe & Ranasinghe, 2012; Sari & Wahyudin, 2019). An interesting finding in this study is that the employers view that reading and listening skills become very important, especially for new employees. This study suggests that university should use a relevant and more interactive approach like communicative language teaching as it is relevant with the typical characteristics of Asian and Indonesia students who are passive and 'shy' (Khmakhien, 2012; Rido & Sari, 2018), implement blended learning and use technology (Sari & Wahyudin, 2019) to accommodate millennial learners who are also digital natives, and design English syllabus (English for Specific Purposes) which caters the students' needs to meet various local and global employability demands. It is hoped that university students, especially in Indonesia, will be better prepared with knowledge and skills for workplace to increase their employability.

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