



Original Research Paper

English Language Proficiency and Employability: Bridging Academic Learning with Workplace Communication

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Abstract

English language proficiency has become a decisive determinant of graduate employability across globalized labour markets, yet a persistent and well-documented gap separates the academic English instruction most students receive from the communicative demands of actual workplace practice. This paper reviews the empirical literature connecting English language proficiency to employment outcomes, synthesizing evidence from graduate-employability surveys, employer-perspective studies, and non-native-speaker workplace-integration research with the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum-design literature that has emerged as the primary pedagogical response to this gap. Particular attention is given to the specific workplace competencies, interview performance, resume and report writing, meeting participation, and client communication, that the reviewed studies identify as most consequential for employment outcomes, and to the recurring finding that traditional academic English instruction, oriented toward examination preparation and general linguistic competence, systematically under-prepares graduates for these tasks. Comparative tables map employability-relevant communication competencies against the specific academic-workplace gap each expose, cross-reference documented barriers non-native speakers face against the pedagogical and organizational responses the literature proposes, and set ESP curriculum-design principles against their reported implementation outcomes. The review concludes that closing the academic-workplace gap requires a structural shift from general English instruction toward needs-based, genre-specific ESP curricula co-designed with industry stakeholders, and identifies rigorous, sector-comparative outcome studies as the field's central research priority.

Keywords: English Language Proficiency, Employability, Workplace Communication, English for Specific Purposes, Graduate Skills Gap, Curriculum Design, Non-Native English Speakers, Higher Education.

1. Introduction

English has become the de facto lingua franca of global professional and corporate communication, a position that makes English language proficiency not merely an academic credential but a functional prerequisite for participation in large segments of the contemporary labor market [1]. A recent review of English language skill for employability found direct correlation between English proficiency and income potential, as well as its impact on job satisfaction and professional growth, while noting that gaps remain in aligning higher-education instruction with the specific communicative demands employers report [1]. This tension, between English proficiency's well-documented economic and career value and the persistent misalignment between how English is taught and how it is actually used at work, forms the central problem this paper addresses.

The employability consequences of this misalignment are not abstract. A study examining English proficiency's impact on university students' employment prospects found that English language fluency enables candidates to articulate ideas confidently during interviews, thereby improving their chances of employment, while graduates with strong language abilities can present their achievements persuasively in written applications, and poorly written resumes risk being overlooked by employers [2]. The same study extended this finding beyond the hiring stage into ongoing workplace performance, noting that in workplace settings, effective English language communication is crucial for tasks such as report writing, meetings, and client engagement, where poor or inadequate proficiency can hinder career progression [2]. This dual finding, that English proficiency affects both initial hiring and subsequent career advancement, establishes

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why the academic-workplace communication gap carries consequences extending well beyond a single job-search episode.

Research specifically focused on non-native English speakers has documented the practical dimensions of this gap in greater depth. A study of English language proficiency and employability in the global workforce found that participants identified almost all skills and skill areas featured in the questionnaire as either vital or essential for their jobs, even though they claimed that they largely lacked the English language skills required, and identified a specific pedagogical cause: exam preparation than on developing communication skills means most learners are not well-prepared to communicate professionally once they graduate from an academic institution [3]. The same study catalogued the resulting workplace consequences directly, finding that communication barriers, low self-confidence, pronunciation difficulties, workplace bias, and inadequate language education all hinder employability and career progression [3].

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emerged across the reviewed literature as the primary pedagogical response to this documented gap. A study integrating ESP into engineering education identified significant gaps between the outcomes of traditional academic language learning and the practical communication requirements of the modern workplace, and characterized ESP specifically as concentrating on discipline-specific vocabulary, communicative functions, and professional tasks relevant to a given field, in contrast to General English's emphasis on broader linguistic competence [4]. This paper reviews the graduate-employability, employer-perspective, and non-native-speaker workplace-integration literature alongside the ESP curriculum-design literature within a single comparative framework, cross-referencing the specific communication competencies employers report valuing against the pedagogical gaps and proposed curricular responses the literature documents.

Research Objectives

- To review empirical evidence connecting English language proficiency to graduate employment outcomes, including hiring, workplace performance, and career advancement.
- To synthesize research on the specific workplace communication barriers non-native English speakers face in professional and international labor-market contexts.
- To examine the English for Specific Purposes curriculum-design literature as the primary pedagogical response to the documented academic-workplace communication gap.

- To evaluate the needs-analysis methodologies the literature proposes for aligning English language instruction with actual workplace communicative demands.
- To identify future research priorities for closing the gap between academic English learning and workplace communication requirements.

II. Literature Review

2.1 English Proficiency and Employment Outcomes

The relationship between English proficiency and employment outcomes has been documented across job-search, hiring, and post-hire performance stages. The review of English language skill for employability found that English proficiency provides significant career advantages while gaps remain in aligning higher-education outcomes with industrial demand, and specifically recommended that universities should design English syllabi that cater to students' needs to meet local and global industrial demands [1]. A related investigation into English for career development examined how university graduates' English communicative abilities contribute to their success in securing employment and performing effectively in the workplace, and identified fluency in spoken English, professional writing skills, presentation skills, and interpersonal communication in English as critical factors that contribute to workplace success specifically, distinguishing these applied competencies from general linguistic accuracy [5]. Sector-specific evidence reinforces this general pattern while highlighting how the required competencies vary by field. A study of graduate employability in relation to English language proficiency, focused on vocational education, found that vocational education in Indonesia often overlooks the importance of equipping students with language skills tailored to their future careers, focusing more on technical skills rather than communication skills, and specifically noted that in the field of engineering, English proficiency at the desired level is essential for engineers as they need this language to perform their tasks and daily duties [6]. Employer-perspective research corroborates this graduate-side evidence directly: a study of target needs of English language for employment among management undergraduates found that the concern for English language of the private sector for employing graduates is high in esteem, such that specific English language competencies are expected by employers, with employers concerned about whether prospective graduate recruits possess these competencies before hiring [7].

2.2 Barriers Facing Non-Native English Speakers in the Workplace

Research focused specifically on non-native English speakers operating in international or English-medium labor markets has documented a more

granular set of workplace barriers than the general employability literature captures. The global-workforce study of English proficiency and employability found that non-native speakers often suffer from communication anxiety, pronunciation problems, low self-confidence, and culture shock, barriers that operate independently of formal grammatical competence and are consequently not well addressed by traditional grammar-focused instruction [3]. The study further identified a specific gap in the existing research base itself, noting that previous research mostly studied employability and English proficiency in certain geographic areas, institutions, particular sectors, or labor market contexts, yet there is no research addressing the problem of English proficiency and employability from the point of view of a non-native English speaker working in an international labor market specifically [3].

A case study of Bangladeshi graduates in the Australian employment market provided direct empirical evidence of how these barriers manifest in a specific migration and employment context, finding that communication skills play a role as a key factor to employers and other representatives of the commercial world, and that proficiency in English is considered an invaluable communication skill by employers evaluating international graduates [8]. Notably, the study found mixed outcomes even among reasonably proficient graduates, reporting that among participants, three were optimistic whereas an equal number of participants had pessimistic views with regard to their success, while comparative evidence within the same study suggested Indian graduates are better in English proficiency than that of Bangladeshi graduates, indicating that English-proficiency-related employability outcomes vary meaningfully even within the broadly defined category of non-native English speaker [8]. Complementary employer-perspective research on Omani graduates similarly examined employers' direct assessments of communication skills, contributing to a growing body of employer-side, rather than purely graduate-side, evidence on which specific competencies determine hiring and workplace success [9].

2.3 The Academic-Workplace Communication Gap

A recurring and central finding across the reviewed literature is that traditional academic English instruction, particularly instruction oriented toward standardized examinations, does not adequately prepare students for workplace communication demands. The global-workforce employability study attributed this gap directly to pedagogical orientation, finding that instruction focused more on exam preparation than on developing communication skills leaves most learners not well-prepared to communicate professionally once they graduate from an academic institution [3]. This

finding is consistent with the vocational-education study's observation that instruction in some contexts focuses more on technical skills rather than communication skills, or, where communication instruction does occur, on general linguistic competence rather than career-specific communicative tasks [6].

The ESP-in-engineering-education study documented a concrete institutional instance of this gap, finding in a case study of a business-English course at an engineering school that the course aims to enhance general language proficiency but fails to meet the specific linguistic needs of mechanical engineering students, prioritizing business communication and soft skills while overlooking technical vocabulary and genre-specific writing conventions specific to the engineering discipline [4]. This case-level finding illustrates a broader structural pattern the ESP literature has documented across many contexts: general English or generic business-English instruction, even when well-intentioned and professionally oriented, frequently fails to match the specific genre conventions, vocabulary, and communicative tasks of a given professional field.

2.4 English for Specific Purposes as a Pedagogical Response

English for Specific Purposes has developed specifically to address the gap documented in Section 2.3, by orienting language instruction around the concrete communicative tasks of a target profession rather than general linguistic competence. A needs-analysis study of ESP courses in art and design education characterized the discipline's growth directly in response to globalization, noting that as the global economy becomes increasingly interconnected and higher education shifts towards a more international orientation, there is an escalating demand for professionals who are not only experts in their field but also proficient in English, a demand ESP addresses by equipping students with the linguistic competences specific to their chosen professions [10]. An overview of ESP curriculum design distinguished the discipline's task-oriented methodology explicitly, noting that the curriculum designer identifies exactly what learners need to do with English and builds instruction around those specific tasks, spanning academic sub-domains such as English for Academic Purposes and professional sub-domains including business, medical, technical, and legal English [11].

Despite this theoretical clarity, empirical evaluation of ESP implementation has found persistent gaps between design principles and classroom practice. A study assessing ESP course effectiveness in higher education found that despite the theoretical emphasis on needs-based curriculum design, several studies indicate that many ESP courses in higher education fail to fully address students' actual

language requirements, citing research suggesting that ESP curricula often prioritize general linguistic competence over specialized communicative tasks, leading to a misalignment between classroom instruction and real-world professional demands that mirrors, at the level of stated ESP programs, the same academic-workplace gap ESP was designed to close [12]. The same study's recommendations pointed toward instructional method as a key remediation lever, arguing that teaching should shift from lecture-based methods to interactive, technology-enhanced strategies, while assessments should prioritize real workplace tasks over traditional testing formats [12].

2.5 Needs Analysis as a Curriculum-Design Methodology

The reviewed ESP literature converges on needs analysis as the methodological foundation for closing the academic-workplace gap, though studies vary in the specific data-collection techniques recommended. The ESP course-effectiveness study specified that needs analysis is typically conducted through surveys, interviews, and classroom observations to assess students' current proficiency and challenges in professional communication, and that effective ESP curriculum design should be data-driven, incorporating insights from students, faculty, and industry professionals to create a course that effectively bridges the gap between university education and workplace communication [12]. A practitioner-oriented guide to ESP for ESL educators detailed this methodology further, distinguishing learner surveys capturing learners' current language confidence, professional roles, and perceived skill gaps from stakeholder interviews with employers or supervisors describing real workplace language demands, and from document analysis reviewing authentic workplace texts, such as medical records, technical manuals, or legal briefs, to map the vocabulary and genre conventions learners will encounter [13].

The needs-analysis study of ESP in art and design education operationalized this multi-source methodology through a formal Teaching Context Analysis, examining the educational environment, including resources available, institutional support, teacher expertise and any constraints that might impact curriculum delivery, alongside learner and stakeholder input, and concluded that the study underscores the need for targeted ESP courses in art and design education tailored specifically to bridge the gap between current proficiency levels and professional language requirements [10]. This finding, emerging from a creative-professional field rather than the engineering or business contexts more commonly studied, provides evidence that the needs-analysis-driven ESP approach generalizes across disciplines with quite different communicative and genre conventions.

2.6 Pedagogical Innovation and Skill-Specific Interventions

Beyond curriculum-level needs analysis, the reviewed literature also documents specific pedagogical interventions targeting particular workplace communication skills. A preliminary study of vocational-education graduate employability evaluated role-play as a pedagogical strategy addressing speaking-skill gaps specifically, finding qualitative feedback highlighted gains in vocabulary, practical communication skills, and readiness to apply English beyond the classroom, and concluding that embedding role-play into vocational English instruction addresses gaps in speaking practice and supports the development of workplace-relevant communication directly [6]. A related workplace-communication training study, focused on administrative staff already employed rather than students preparing for employment, evaluated a targeted "English for Workplace Communication" course addressing oral and written communication specifically, finding that while participants reported positive engagement with the course, the study's findings also indicate a link between low English proficiency and graduate readiness gaps that persist even after targeted, employed-context training, suggesting that remediation is more effective when addressed during initial education rather than retrofitted after entry into the workforce [6].

2.7 Research Gap

While the employability-outcome literature reviewed in Sections 2.1 and 2.2 has established robust evidence that English proficiency affects hiring, workplace performance, and career advancement, and the ESP curriculum-design literature reviewed in Sections 2.4 and 2.5 has established a needs-analysis-based methodology for aligning instruction with workplace demands, comparatively few studies directly measure whether ESP-based curricular interventions produce quantifiable employability improvements relative to general English instruction, and, as the global-workforce study explicitly noted, no work reviewed here specifically addresses the intersection of proficiency and employability from the standpoint of non-native speakers navigating international labor markets across multiple sectors simultaneously [3]. This review addresses that gap by organizing the reviewed evidence within a comparative framework spanning workplace competency, documented barrier, and proposed pedagogical response.

III. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative research design synthesizing peer-reviewed and practitioner literature on English language proficiency, graduate employability, and English for Specific Purposes curriculum design. Reviewed works were compared along four axes:

focus population (general graduates, non-native English speakers in international labor markets, or sector-specific cohorts such as engineering or vocational students); evidence type (employer-perspective survey, graduate self-report study, or curriculum-design/needs-analysis study); employability stage addressed (hiring/interview, workplace performance, or career advancement);

Table 1. Workplace Communication Competencies and the Academic-Workplace Gap

Competency	Employability Stage	Documented Academic Gap	Key Reference
Spoken fluency / interview performance	Hiring	General instructions emphasize exams preparation over spoken confidence	English for career development [5]; IJRIS study [2]
Resume and application writing	Hiring	Limited instruction in persuasive, professional written self-presentation	IJRIS study [2]
Report writing	Workplace performance	Academic writing conventions differ from workplace report genres	IJRIS study [2]

4.2 Barriers Facing Non-Native Speakers Cross-Referenced Against Pedagogical Responses

Table 2 shifts from competency to documented barrier, cross-referencing each barrier against the response the literature proposes.

Table 2. Non-Native Speaker Workplace Barriers and Proposed Responses

Barrier	Documented In	Proposed Response	Key Reference

and whether the study proposed or evaluated a specific pedagogical intervention.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1 Workplace Communication Competencies Mapped to the Academic-Workplace Gap

Table 1 maps the specific workplace communication competencies the reviewed literature identifies as employability-relevant onto the academic-instruction gap each exposes.

Meeting participation / interpersonal communication	Workplace performance	General English lacks discipline-specific communicative functions	English for career development [5]
Technical/discipline-specific vocabulary	Workplace performance	Business/general English courses omit field-specific terminology	ESP in engineering education [4]
Pronunciation and communication confidence	Workplace performance, career advancement	Grammar-focused instruction does not address anxiety/confidence barriers	Global workforce study [3]
Client engagement	Career advancement	Insufficient authentic-task practice in curricula	IJRIS study [2]

Communication anxiety, low self-confidence	International labor-market studies	Role-play and authentic-task practice	Global workforce study [3]; Vocational employability study [6]
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Pronunciation difficulties	International labor-market studies	Speaking-focused, interactive instruction	Global workforce study [3]
Workplace bias against non-native speakers	International labor-market studies	Employer-side awareness; needs analysis including employer input	Global workforce study [3]
Exam-oriented prior instruction	Graduate self-report studies	Shift from testing to authentic workplace-task assessment	ESP course effectiveness study [12]
Misalignment between course content and field	Sector-specific curriculum audits	Genre-based, needs-analysis-driven ESP curriculum	ESP in engineering education [4]; ESP needs analysis (art/design) [10]
Variable outcomes across nationality/context	Cross-national case studies	Context-specific needs analysis rather than uniform curricula	Bangladeshi graduates in Australia study [8]

4.3 ESP Curriculum-Design Principles and Reported Implementation Outcomes

Table 3 consolidates the ESP needs-analysis methodologies reviewed against their reported implementation outcomes.

Table 3. ESP Needs-Analysis Methods and Reported Outcomes

Method	Data Source	Reported Outcome	Key Reference
Learner surveys	Students	Captures self-reported confidence and skill gaps	ESP guide for ESL educators [13]
Stakeholder interviews	Employers/supervisors	Identifies real workplace language demands directly	ESP guide for ESL educators [13]; Target needs study [7]
Document/genre analysis	Authentic workplace texts	Maps discipline-specific vocabulary and conventions	ESP guide for ESL educators [13]
Teaching Context Analysis	Institutional environment	Identifies resource/institutional constraints on delivery	ESP needs analysis (art/design) [10]
Mixed-methods (content analysis + observation)	Curriculum + classroom practice	Reveals misalignment between course objectives and field demands	ESP in engineering education [4]

Role-play / task-based pedagogy	Classroom intervention	Reported gains in vocabulary, confidence, workplace readiness	Vocational employability study [6]
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The consolidated evidence across Tables 1–3 indicates that the academic-workplace communication gap is neither a single, uniform deficiency nor evenly distributed across skills: hiring-stage gaps concentrate in spoken confidence and persuasive written self-presentation, while workplace-performance gaps concentrate in discipline-specific vocabulary, genre conventions, and interpersonal or client-facing communication that general English instruction rarely addresses directly [2], [4], [5]. The needs-analysis-driven ESP literature reviewed in Section 2.5 offers a methodologically consistent response across these varied gaps, but the ESP course-effectiveness evidence reviewed in Section 2.4 also cautions that ESP implementation itself frequently falls short of its own design principles, prioritizing general linguistic competence over the specialized communicative tasks the needs analysis was intended to surface [12].

V. Future Research Directions

Three priorities emerge from the reviewed literature. First, rigorous, outcome-comparative studies are needed to establish whether needs-analysis-driven ESP curricula produce measurably better employment and workplace-performance outcomes than general English instruction, since the reviewed literature establishes the theoretical case for ESP's superiority but rarely quantifies the resulting employability gain directly [4], [12]. Second, the specific research gap the global-workforce study identified, examining English proficiency and employability from the standpoint of non-native speakers navigating international labor markets across multiple sectors and nationalities simultaneously, remains largely open and would extend the single-nationality case-study evidence currently available [3], [8]. Third, given the reviewed literature's consistent finding that confidence and anxiety barriers persist independently of grammatical competence, further research should evaluate psychologically informed, task-based pedagogical interventions, such as the role-play method piloted in vocational education, at larger scale and across a wider range of professional sectors [6].

VI. Conclusion

This review has examined the relationship between English language proficiency and graduate employability, synthesizing evidence on hiring and workplace-performance outcomes, non-native-speaker workplace barriers, and the English for

Specific Purposes curriculum-design literature developed in response. Across the reviewed literature, English proficiency emerges as a consistent and substantial determinant of employment outcomes, career advancement, and workplace performance, while a persistent gap separates the general, often exam-oriented academic English instruction most students receive from the discipline-specific, task-oriented communicative competencies employers report valuing. Needs-analysis-driven ESP curricula, incorporating learner, employer, and authentic-document data sources, represent the field's principal pedagogical response to this gap, though the reviewed evidence indicates that ESP implementation itself frequently falls short of its stated design principles. Closing the academic-workplace communication gap durably will require both wider adoption of rigorous, multi-source needs-analysis methodology in ESP curriculum design and stronger, outcome-comparative research establishing which specific interventions convert improved English proficiency into measurable employability gains.

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