Research

English as a Key Employability Capacity: Perspectives from Vietnamese Students and Lecturers

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Building on a research trend that unravels the relationship between English language and employability (e.g., Erling, 2014; Hamid, 2015), this study explored 617 Vietnamese students and six lecturers' perspectives regarding university students' English as an employability skill. A mixed method was employed to collect both survey and interview data in three major universities in North Vietnam. The data investigated students' levels of confidence, in relation to both their English competency and career skills performed in English. The results indicated students' high level of uncertainty in both their English and career skills performed in English, which corresponded to their insufficient English for employability purposes. Specifically, over 80% of the students indicated their uncertainty about seeking employment that required English. The study provides recommendations for improving pedagogies, policies and practices to promote English as an employable skill for the multifaceted demands of the global job market.

Keywords: English, Vietnam, employability capacity, program development

The era of global inter-dependence positions English language education (ELE) reforms as a high priority and a key part of social investment, and the human capital priority for the national socio-economic, educational and political developments (Erling, 2014; Erling & Seargeant, 2013). In Asia, the growing economic shifts from agrarian-based to multifunctional economies require young citizens to be equipped with essential skills (Erling, 2014). This includes English as a strategy to address youth unemployment. Driven by the various demands of the globalized market, young people are required to urgently obtain skill sets derived from English to enrich

and sustain their stock of employability skills (Aggarwal, 2010; Coleman, 2011; Erling, 2014). However, central to tremendous ELE policy shifts is how these policies prepare university students for the employability capacities needed after graduation.

Recently, researchers concerned with language policies, equity and employability (Coleman, 2011; Erling & Seargeant, 2013; Phillipson, 2012) and leading organizations such as the British Council have moved beyond exploring the effectiveness of ELE policies to actively uncovering the relationship between English and employability. Studies in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka report a positive link between English and economic development, especially employability (Coleman, 2011; Erling & Seargeant, 2013).

While the scholars calling for an urgent need to unravel the relationship between English and employability has actively emerged across Asia (e.g., Coleman, 2011; Ferguson, 2013), such similar research is extremely under-addressed in Vietnam. This is a critical gap because 77.5% of the population is active members of the workforce (15-60 years) (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2016). Nevertheless, research on the relationship between English and employability in Vietnam is extremely limited, and this situation needs to be considered against a context of the nation's ELE reforms.

Since 2008, the state has placed a heavy emphasis on English as a compulsory subject in various disciplines. According to the government, as many as 20 million students will benefit from this emphasis (Decision 1400/QD-TTg, 2008). Building on recent research, and addressing the scarcity of literature in the context, this study argues for a critical need to explore the degree to which Vietnamese university students are equipped with English language skills for employability. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to investigate perspectives regarding students' English, and their language-based employability capacity from lecturers and university students. The data included student surveys and interviews with students and lecturers. In particular, the study inquires into the following research question:

How do university students and their lecturers perceive students' English, particularly in relation to their future employability?

The study begins with a literature review on the relationship between English and employability. This is then followed by a description of the methodology while investigating the research topic. Finally, the study discusses the results and conclusions, and offers recommendations to promote English as one of vital employability skills.

English as an Indicator of Employability

What Is Employability?

Employability manifests as the multi-faceted traits of a person; and the knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and thrive in their chosen occupations; bring benefit to themselves, the national workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2004). Employability comprises two main categories: hard skills or discipline-specific skills, and soft skills or employability skills. Employability skills include communication skills (verbal and such as reading, listening, writing and speaking, and non-

verbal skills, namely body language) in both the vernacular and dominant global languages (Pooja, 2013). This notion further emphasizes the roles of multiple languages, including English, in securing employment. Pooja's (2013) study on employers' perspectives of employability place a great emphasis on literacy and linguistic skills. Generally speaking, the concept of employability suggests the essential role of English in constructing and sustaining the development of both one's expertise and soft skills.

Studies on English as an Employability Skill

Studies on English as an aspect of employability provide evidence of positive correlation between competent English language skills and economic opportunities, especially when the language, in Asian contexts, is embedded in development initiatives (Coleman, 2010; Erling & Seargeant, 2013; Grin, 2001; Ku & Zussman, 2010; Hamid, 2015; Lee, 2012). There is a positive impact of English on national economic development, as knowing English is perceived as offering a competitive edge and is "highly rewarded in the labour market" (Erling, 2014, p.3). Economic development initiatives in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and India reiterate that English language is an essential element, especially in outsourcing occurring within the service industry, information technology (IT), healthcare, and hospitality, which helps alleviate these countries' unemployment and poverty issues (Asian Development Bank, 2013). Similarly, studies in Pakistan and India (Aslam, Kingdon, De & Kumar, 2010) found significant returns to education including English because this and other languages function as a central platform for young people to achieve lucrative occupations and increased earnings (Coleman, 2010; Erling & Seargeant, 2013; Grin, 2001; Ku & Zussman, 2010). Grin (2001) reported a link between English and economic value as salary premiums rise along with English competency in the Swiss linguistic market.

While there is a positive link between English and economic benefits, studies indicate the fragile role of English education in strengthening employability capacities in practice, largely because of employees' limited English competency (Azam, Chin & Prakash, 2011; Ferrari & Dhingra, 2009; Pooja, 2013). Particularly, insufficient English comprehension skills represent a critical hindrance for students to confidently enter the job market. Studies on English for employability with engineering students in India reported that only 27% of the cohort surveyed possessed business English capacities (Seetha, 2012). Moreover, in the context of rising demand for Indian engineers to provide services related to software and IT, students' communication skills are reported to be a significant barrier for students when dealing with clients across the United States and the United Kingdom (Azam et al., 2011; Ferrari & Dhingra, 2009; Pooja, 2013). Similarly, it was rather shocking that 47% of graduates were "not employable in any sectors" due to their insufficient English, especially communication skills in English (Aspiring Minds, 2013, p.7). This result further indicates a convergence between a strong demand for English and students' reduced employability. Another issue that reinforces the gap between ELE policies and employability is that a large number of students have not yet experienced English language education at levels that allow them to benefit economically (Erling, 2014).

In Vietnam, globalization has greatly influenced the country's higher education. With the agenda of socializing education, Vietnam has promoted various educational cooperations,

programs, and models to meet the needs of the modern society (London, 2011). In parallel with the overall changes in education, Vietnam English language policies have undergone significant shifts such as the National Foreign Language Project 2020. This project requires young Vietnamese citizens to be equipped with English language skills in order to improve national and regional employability and development (Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg, 2008). English is already mandated a compulsory subject for all students nationwide from Grade 3 onwards. University students are required to take 12 credits of English together with their majors in order to fulfill their graduation requirements and to meet the needs for regional and international job markets.

The literature on English and employability capacities suggests a complex and contested issue of whether English can provide critical economic returns. ELE in universities, in fact, plays a very minimal role in strengthening students' employable capacities due to mismatched teaching orientations, ambiguous language education needs, and divergent gaps between students' learning outcomes and employers' needs. The scholarship further illuminates the lack of research on teaching and learning English, and students' ability to get employed. The available research inadequately examines the perspectives of students and lecturers on students' English capability and their employment goals. The current study argues an essential need to gain a rigorous understanding of the extent to which current ELE initiatives can support university students. The study attempts to address the gaps of the current literature and provide suggestions to strengthen ELE toward career-oriented and socio-economic advancement. The following section discusses the methodology used to investigate the research problem.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was utilized as it provides a cross-check to confirm the validity and measure the reliability level; and gets a more nuanced understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Both quantitative and qualitative data, collected between March and June, 2016, focused on (i) students' confidence in their English for employability purposes; (ii) employability skills in English learned at universities; (ii), and (iii) recommendations on how to acquire English language in order to increase employability. The validity and credibility of the questionnaire was justified based on the existing literature as well as the rigorous steps of developing, piloting, and conducting the questionnaire. In particular, the English and Vietnamese questionnaires were developed based on the literature in relation to English employability (Seetha, 2012; Pooja, 2013) and were piloted with 50 university students in order to address potentially unclear questions and incomplete aspects of the research topic. Unclear areas of the survey were then be fixed and the survey was piloted the second time and the third time to make sure all aspects were comprehensive to the students. The final version of the survey was then completed by 617 students at three universities in North Vietnam. These universities offer high-quality undergraduate programs (see Table 1). The students completing the surveys were between 20 and 24 years old and at their third or final year (4th) of the undergraduate programs. Besides the English programs, these university students were not provided with further support for their English learning and soft skill development. Nevertheless, the majority of the students (91.5%) had learned English for more than 7 years prior to their university enrolment.

Table 1***Brief description of the researched universities***

University	Number of full-time students	Number of students surveyed	Majors of students surveyed
University 1	5,000	202	International Relations, External Information
University 2	11,000	227	Business Administration, Animal Husbandry, Environment, Natural Science, Social Science, Management - Economic Laws, Finance — Banking
University 3	7,500	188	Nursery Education, Politics, Information Technology, Economics, Biology, Chemistry, Business Administration

In an attempt to obtain further in-depth data and detailed explanations about students' lack of confidence, and its affecting factors of curriculum, teaching methods and assessment, two EFL instructors and two students from each of the three institutions were invited to participate in face-to-face interviews in Vietnamese to make sure of the respondents' accurate understanding. The instructors and students participated in the interviewed were randomly chosen. The instructor participants had at least three years of teaching experience in their content area in English, and had an understanding of the English language programs as well as their students' English abilities. In addition, the students were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews on the basis of their questionnaire responses. The interviews were conducted outside classroom hours and audio-recorded. The interview questions focused on the students' English skills and their career employability in relation to English. The interviews were then transcribed, and the transcripts were sent to the interview participants for a check of accuracy. The transcripts were then translated into English and verified by a certified English lecturer in a teacher education institution in North Vietnam.

For the qualitative data analysis, the study employed an iterative and recursive process; we inductively identified universal patterns during the first coding cycle of the interview data by carefully reading the transcripts to generate themes and categories. The themes that emerged were then deductively interpreted and developed as the final themes to support the findings (Berg, 2001; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The quantitative data was analyzed for students' levels of confidence in employability-related matters and their English competence using a percentile scoring system.

In the following section, we will discuss major themes that illuminate students' and lecturers' perceptions section regarding students' English skills for employability.

Findings

Students' English Skills for Employability

The survey data indicated that students' perspectives regarding English skills for employability were alarmingly limited. In particular, besides two skills (introducing oneself and reading comprehension in English) which over 50% showed their lack of confidence, the remaining results indicated that students felt overwhelmingly uncertain about the rest of their skills (ranging from 60 to 85%). In particular, the skills in which students were found to show a

strikingly lack of confidence were their ability to listen to different topics (60.29% and 23.18% for not confident and not very confident, respectively), collect information (59.48% and 18.48%), and communicate in English (57.21% and 23.18 %). The survey results further indicated that students' areas of uncertainty about employability skills included answering phone inquiries (56.40% and 24.80%), participating in job interviews (57.86% and 18.96%), reading information on websites (54.62% and 22.04 %), and understanding human resource policies (55.75% and 26.58%). As many as 78.28% of the students reported that they were uncertain of their ability to create documents, letters, reports, and invoices in English.

Similar to the survey results, the interviews with students showed that most of them (5 out of 6) were not confident in their English after graduation, even though all of them had studied English from 9 to 13 years. Regarding the interviews, most students indicated that their English was insufficient for applying for jobs performed in English. A student interviewed indicated that: "my English is not enough to communicate in a workplace that requires English because my listening and speaking skills are very limited." This response echoed the perspectives of the lecturers, who indicated that an emphasis on grammar learning prior to university enrolment and limited access to daily English communication were significant causative factors. When discussing students' ability to read in information on websites and understand human resource policies, a lecturer reflected that:

My students can quickly find the English news about their favorite pop singer or actor, but they do not really know about changes in policies and other social issues. They just don't care enough or take these skills seriously in their learning.

We further delved into students' career skills performed in English in order to obtain a deeper understanding of students' English employability skill. The following themes highlight their career skills performed in English.

Students' Career Skills Performed in English

Table 2

Students' English skills and English as an employability skill

Content Performed in English	Very confident	Quite confident	Not confident	Not very confident	Don't know
I. English skills					
1. Ability to collect information	0.49	18.31	59.48	18.48	3.24
2. Ability to listen to different topics	0.49	12.97	60.29	23.18	3.08
3. Ability to communicate	0.65	14.42	57.21	23.18	4.54
4. Ability to answer inquiries via phone	0.32	14.42	56.40	24.80	4.05
5. Ability to do presentations	1.46	26.09	49.59	20.75	2.11
6. Ability to introduce yourself	3.73	44.08	38.57	11.83	1.78
7. Ability to answer interview questions	1.46	18.96	57.86	18.96	2.76
8. Ability to comprehend readings	1.94	34.52	48.78	10.53	4.21
9. Ability to understand timetables and job-related agendas	1.13	28.20	52.35	15.88	2.43
10. Ability to read information regarding companies online	0.65	16.53	54.62	22.04	6.16
11. Ability to understand human resource policies	0.32	10.37	55.75	26.58	6.97
12. Ability to create documents, for example, letters, instructions, announcements, forms, and email, etc.	0.65	15.24	52.35	25.93	5.83
II. English as an Employability Skill					
13. Ability to work with colleagues in group	0.81	16.37	58.02	20.58	4.21
14. Problem-solving skills	0.65	12.16	59.97	22.37	4.86
15. Interpersonal skills (e.g., sharing, supporting, cooperating, etc.)	0.65	17.67	57.37	19.61	4.70
16. Ability to use technologies	1.30	19.29	53.16	20.91	5.35
17. Business skills	0.65	9.40	59.16	24.31	6.48
18. Leadership skills	0.49	10.86	54.62	27.55	6.48
19. Debating	0.32	8.104	56.56	29.17	5.83
20. Ability to find a good job thanks to my good English skills	0.65	5.67	55.11	32.41	6.16
21. Ability to work with people around the world thanks to my good English skills	0.65	5.99	51.54	34.85	6.97
22. Ability to find scholarships for my professional development thanks to my good English ability	0.32	5.35	50.41	37.28	6.65

The survey results further indicated a strong correlation between the students' lack of confidence in their English and career skills performed in English. Overall, as many as 70% to 80% of 617 students were uncertain (both not confident and not very confident) about their career skills in English. The results indicated that students lacked confidence in debating (56.56% and 29.17% for not confident and not very confident, respectively), working with people worldwide (51.59% and 34.85%), and finding scholarships for career development (50.41% and 37.28%). Similarly, as many as 55.11% and 32.41 % of the students were not confident and not very confident, respectively, in their ability to seek a job that requires

English. A student majoring in environmental science reflected similar feelings to others when talking about her English skills:

I am not confident with my English skills when applying for a job. My other skills such as working in groups, problem solving, debating, presentation, and leadership in English are also very limited.

In contrast, two other two students showed their confidence in English for employability as they understood the importance of English or had participated in skill courses for career development in English. As a student said:

I am quite confident in my English when I apply for a job because I understand the importance of learning English in the era of global integration. Thus, I invest time and money in learning skill-based courses.

These two students believed that if they actively participated in learning communicative English and studied to obtain certified English programs (e.g. TOEIC) for their future jobs, they could afford to feel quite secure about their language skills for job-seeking purposes. However, although these students had positive feelings about their English, they largely acknowledged that their essential job skills such as collaboration, problem solving, debating, presentation, and leadership were somewhat insufficient. As one student commented:

Although I feel confident about my English, if I have to perform skills such as group work or problem solving in English, I am still not as capable. I lack skills and experience in solving problems. Moreover, I do not think that I can debate or perform as a leader of some kind because I lack comprehensive training in English.

The interview results with lecturers showed their reluctance to comment on the students' English skills. While two lecturers indicated confidence in their students' English, as students had to obtain a required English score (450 TOEIC) before graduation, the remaining four thought that only a small number of their students could function well in terms of English for job-seeking. The principal issues preventing students from obtaining good English skills, as the lecturers indicated, were the lack of an environment to practice English, students' selective English skills, students' limited socio-economic understanding, and disciplinary knowledge. As one lecturer said:

Some students have a clear career goal, such as they will work for foreign companies so they invest in learning English. However, for most of the students, I feel that their knowledge about the economy, education, and society and their majors is increasingly limited. Thus, all this significantly affects their learning English and using English as a good career capacity.

The survey results significantly corresponded to the lecturers' comments, reinforcing uncertainty about the students' skills. Although the lecturers actively integrated these skills in

their programs, they agreed that the students' English skills mostly ranged from average to below average. As another lecturer remarked:

The students' group work and problem solving skills are significantly enhanced because they participate quite well and learn from each other when working in groups to solve a problem. However, students lack debating skills because they have not yet developed their own opinions when they do not agree with their peers' ideas. On the other hand, some students' debating skills are quite advanced, and they seem to dominate others in the debate. Moreover, although students have good knowledge about technology, they seem to be nervous when doing a presentation. Only a small number of students possess good leadership skills.

Commenting on their ability to communicate with people in the workplace and worldwide in English, 5 out of 6 students asked indicated that they were not confident with this skill as their English and communicative skills were inadequate. The interview results further showed the similar trend in terms of the students' communicative skills in the workplace. Similar to the students, almost all of the lecturers were ambivalent about the students' ability to communicate with others in English in their workplace. A lecturer in business management reflected:

I think students can only manage function some simple conversations in English. Only a small number of students are capable of working effectively with people in the region and worldwide in English. Although we have tried hard to create favorable conditions for students to practice English, they still lack a real English-speaking environment. Thus, they are unable to react naturally in English and seem to be unconfident in communication.

Another lecturer shared a similar thought: "The students are not yet able to communicate confidently in the workplace because they only learn speaking via CDs and TV channels. Their English vocabulary is also very limited." These reflections support Vietnamese scholars' growing concerns about Vietnamese students' poor command of both oral and written English competence after graduating from tertiary education (Hoang, 2013; Nguyen, 2010).

Discussion

This study explored students' English as an employability skill from students' and lecturers' perspectives. The results support studies by Azam et al. (2011); Ferrari and Dhingra (2009); and Pooja (2013) which largely suggest that across various contexts students' English as an employability skill is largely insufficient. This study further supports Clement and Murugavel (2015) and Seetha (2012), who also indicated that students' remarkably limited abilities in English were due to various factors, including their lack of English knowledge, communicative English, and skills, as well as skill-based courses in English. While we strongly agree that English and skills performed in English alone do not secure successful employment, we can nevertheless conclude that students' limited English as an employability skill could tremendously diminish their stock of knowledge for employment (Author1, forthcoming a&b). When most of students are unable to utilize their English as a transferable job capacity, their

future social mobility and socio-economic opportunities are significantly threatened (Aspiring Minds, 2013). Considering this in a broader perspective, students' extreme uncertainty about their English and related employability could affect the nation's potential to provide a sustainable and skilled workforce to meet the wide-ranging demands of the job market in the region and the world.

The purpose of this study was not limited to investigating students' English as an employment capacity. It also attempted to offer some practical recommendations for policy makers, lecturers, and associated stakeholders to work towards promoting programs to enhance students' English and capacities to be employed. Thus, a systematic English education from the primary level onwards is strongly recommended. Students' limited English skills suggest that although most of them could benefit from appropriate teaching methods at the tertiary level, this still cannot compensate for their lack of pre-existing solid English knowledge. This deficiency results from unsystematic and problematic teaching quality offered at the lower levels as many lecturers and students indicated (Author1, 2016b). Thus, in the tertiary context, students seem to struggle to either acquire or revise their English with many other courses' requirements. This evidenced by our results show that more than 80% of the students were not confident performing a job in English. We have identified the need to persistently promote the importance of English among students as well as a mindset of lifelong language learning. We suggest that lecturers to guide students to become researchers of their own learning to mobilize abundant online materials including websites, videos, magazines, and films as resourceful tools to enhance their English and soft skills (Luke, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Moreover, one serious matter arising from the data is students' tremendously insufficient socio-economic and educational background knowledge, which further reveals their fragile potential to compete in the demanding job market (Erling, 2014; Hamid, 2015). We urge educators and the stakeholders to re-conceptualize what it means to provide English as well as general education for youth. Therefore, we argue that lifelong learning further reflects the state and educators' abilities to rethink and reposition the goal of education. This creates more complete individuals who possess not only knowledge and skills in English but also sound socio-political, educational, and economic foundations to make contributions on individual, national and international scales.

Third, since the final purpose of the students is to be able to be employed in their desired careers, universities should foster a collaborative, sustainable, and supportive relationship with employers in fields related to their majors. Knowledge, insights, skills, and demands derived from employers should function as a plausible ground to structure, sustain, and develop diverse skill-based courses to prepare students for job markets (Ku & Zussman, 2010; Lee, 2012). Career workshops, inviting successful employers to be guest speakers, and short and long term internship programs should be integrated to narrow the gap between theory and practice, while offering more opportunities for students to build relationships with companies and employers (Pooja, 2013). Generally speaking, besides the quality of students' knowledge and programs, we believe that English as employability skill has to be developed using a systematic, collaborative, diverse, and conscientious approach. This requires tremendous effort from the students themselves, their universities, and associated stakeholders to actively work towards

offering intellectual products with strong English as highly employable skills that meet ever-demanding requirements of domestic and international employers.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study is to explore students' English as an employability skill. The results of the study show students lack of English when it is regarded as an employability capacity. Students' lack of English proficiency, skills, as well as skill-based programs in English were reported as principal hindrances to look for jobs that require English.

The study only aims to investigate perspectives regarding English as an employability skill from students and lecturers. Future studies, thus, are recommended to examine other stakeholders such as employers' perspectives and experiences on hiring students to perform tasks in English. More follow-up studies are also suggested to examine how students perform their tasks later as well as generate perspectives from their employers regarding skills needed in the workplace. Such research directions will further contribute to structuring English programs around the job markets' desires and supporting students to become versatile, confident, and efficient English language users, especially to function in jobs that require English.

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