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# English Language Competency for Employment Purposes: Meeting the Needs of the Industry

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## **Abstract**

*The literature on employable graduates indicates that there is a considerable concern regarding the widening gap between the communication skills in English of job applicants and the English language competency required for employment. This paper presents the findings of a study to investigate the industry's perceptions of the importance of graduates' English language competency for employment purposes, the industry's assessment of graduates' English language competency and the industry's initiatives to enhance the English language competency of employees. Data for the study were gathered from 123 respondents from the Financial Services, Manufacturing and Industrial, and Telecommunications, Technology and Media industry sectors using a triangulation of methods comprising a seminar, semi-structured interviews, and a survey questionnaire. The findings of this study indicate that English is the most important language for employment and consistently assessed in the industry. The industry was also found to be pro-active in enhancing employees' English language competency through in-house training programmes. The paper concludes that due to the competitiveness and volatility of the market environment, there is an urgent need to adequately prepare graduates with skills associated with the English language competency for the 21st century workplace.*

**Keywords:** English Language Competency, Employability Skills, Malaysian Graduates, Communication skills

## INTRODUCTION

The literature on employability and job qualifications for college graduates and job performance indicators reveals the importance of generic employability skills above specific occupational skills (Cotton, 2001; Natriello, 1989). Some of the critical employability skill employers look for are communication skills, work habits, experience, personal characteristics, attitude, ethics and values, (Shyla, 2007; Birmingham Post, 2007; Lewis, 2007; Bronson, 2007; Syrquin, 2007; Smith, 2006; Stumpf, 2007; Butler, 2006; Baxter & Young 1982; Suan, 2004; Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002; Chang, 2004; Malaysian Employers Federation, 2004; Smith, 2006; SCANS, 1992). Critical communication skills reported by employers include oral and written communication skills and reading skills, especially understanding and following instructions, while dependability, responsibility and positive attitude toward work were considered vital affective skills.

Other studies conducted on graduate employment focus on the employers' preference for vital soft skills such as interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and teamwork (Birmingham Post, 2007; Bronson, 2007; Butler, 2006; Suan, 2004; Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002; Chang, 2004; Malaysian Employers Federation, 2009; Quek, 2005; Boud & Middleton, 2003). Employers are also looking for cognitive skills like research skills, computer skills, numerical skills, and higher order thinking skills such as problem solving and decision making skills, learning skills and strategies, creative and innovative thinking (Suan, 2004; Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002; Chang, 2004; Shyla, 2007; Stumpf, 2007; Malaysian Employers Federation, 2004). Several studies have also highlighted employers' preference for graduates with qualities such as openness to diversity and global understanding; attributes such as diligence, dependability, honesty, flexibility, adaptability and resourcefulness (Smith, 2006; Shyla, 2007; Bancino & Zevalkink, 2007; Bronson, 2007; Suan, 2004; Quek, 2005; Chang, 2004; Harvey, 1999). Overall, the attributes of employability skills and categories vary from one researcher to another, from 25 to 76 skills and 6 to 9 categories (Chang, 2004; Poole, 1985).

The importance of employability skills, in particular, competency in the English language, has seen countries such as Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan

undertake proactive measures to enhance the standards of English. In 2002, the Japanese government proposed two strategic plans to boost Japanese students' command of the English language; namely, to send 1,000 senior high school students abroad to participate in an immersion programme to help them learn to speak the language; and to require Japan's 6,000 English teachers working in public schools to undergo a special training programme during the summer holidays over a period of five years. Japanese universities like Keio, Waseda, and Seijo universities have undertaken pro-active measures to arrest the decline and improve the English competency in the effort to enhance the marketability of their graduates ("Scientists? English targeted", 2003).

Keio University, for instance, offered a new scientific technology course in which all lectures were conducted in English. Waseda University's Science and Engineering department in collaboration with the University of Michigan introduced a course to teach engineering terms in English. Similarly, Seijo University introduced a student-exchange programme with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee ("Scientists? English targeted", 2003).

In Korea, steps ranging from drastic reform in the English education system to the creation of environments conducive to practice the use of English have been suggested (Early English boosts scores in South Korea, 2006). Similarly, the Taiwanese government introduced a nationwide English evaluation examination for those with a junior high school education in the effort to encourage the population to improve their English competency in order to compete in a rapidly globalising economy. There was also a real concern about the detrimental effect of the short message service or SMS on the standards of English among students in Singapore (SMS behind drop in standards of English, 2002). It was claimed that such usage had adversely affected the standards of written English.

In Hong Kong, a survey conducted on banks, for example, reported that almost half of the employees have a poor or very poor standard of English, generally due to spelling mistakes, poor expression and grammatical errors (Moy, 2003). The survey concluded that the poor English competency of employees will affect the status of Hong Kong as the leading financial centre in Asia. According to Moy, "Potential buyers will look at their reports, publications and websites. If they can sense these companies are not able to do the simple things right, then from an investment manager's perspective, that is something really unappealing" (p. 4).

In the Malaysian context, institutions of higher learning have been entrusted to “undertake measures to increase the proficiency of students in English and enhance their ability to access knowledge and undertake research” (Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010, p. 257). Although institutions of higher learning have implemented various short and long term measures, employers have continued to voice their dissatisfactions concerning the English competency of university graduates (Isarji, et al, 2008). In particular, employers are concerned with the general level of graduates’ preparedness to use English for employment and have persisted in their assertion of the widening gap between the English language requirements for employment and the English competency of job applicants (Hafizoah & Fatimah, 2010; Chang, 2004; Suan, 2004; Malaysian Employers Federation, 2004.) Malaysian employers have cited that poor English language competency has hampered graduates of Malaysian higher education institutions to present ideas and explain issues orally, in writing, and in group discussions; to write reports, project papers, proposals and minutes of meeting; to convey ideas spontaneously in impromptu situations; and to negotiate, lead and manage.

The issue of unemployable graduates has created scepticism concerning the efforts of higher education institutions in Malaysia to enhance graduates’ employability skills, particularly, graduates’ English language competency for employment. Transformation of higher education and restructuring of the educational system in terms of its effectiveness in producing employable graduates to meet the demand of the job market and to compete in the international arena have been regularly highlighted in the media (Chang, 2004; Suan, 2004; Malaysian Employers Federation, 2004; Timbuong, 2007; Krishnamoorthy, 2007; Ramli, 2006; Uda Nagu, 2006; NST, 2007). As a result, Malaysian institutions of higher learning are hard-pressed not only to intensify their efforts to enhance students’ English competency, but also to ensure that graduates’ English competency are compatible with the needs of the industry.

Unlike many employability studies which highlight the importance of different types of employability skills, studies on employability conducted in Malaysia have shown that English language competency is the most critical skill lacking among graduates of Malaysian higher education institutions (Siti Hanim, 2008; Isarji et al., 2008; Morshidi et al., 2008; Ambigapathy & Aniswal, 2005; Ngui, 2005; JobStreet.com, 2005; Suan, 2004; Malaysian Employers Federation, 2004; Chang, 2004). If the status quo persists, the existing gap between the English competency of Malaysian university graduates and the English language requirements of the industry will continue to widen and the issue of unemployable graduates will be exacerbated.

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study were to investigate:

1. the importance of English language competency in the industry;
2. the industry's assessment of graduates' English language competency; and
3. the industry's initiatives to enhance the English language competency of employees.

For the purpose of the study, the following research questions were formulated.

1. How important are graduates' English language competency in the Financial Services, Manufacturing and Industrial, and Telecommunications, Technology & Media industry sectors?
2. What is the extent of the industry's assessment of graduates' English language competency in the Financial Services, Manufacturing and Industrial, and Telecommunications, Technology & Media industry sectors?
3. What are the initiatives of the Financial Services, Manufacturing and Industrial, and Telecommunications, Technology & Media industry sectors to enhance the English language competency of employees?

## METHODOLOGY

The findings of the study were derived from the composite data collected from a triangulation of methods; namely, a series of semi-structured interviews, a survey and a seminar. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in order to address the research objectives. For the purpose of the study, a 13-item survey questionnaire based on Rosette's (1982) question types was formulated, while a seven-item question was designed for the interview protocol used in the semi-structured interviews and seminar. The survey questionnaire and the interview protocol were piloted and validated by content experts and experts from the industry sectors. A total of 123 respondents from three industry sectors participated in the market survey. The industry sectors selected are Financial Services, Manufacturing and Industrial, and Telecommunications, Technology & Media.



### **Phase 1: Semi-structured Interviews**

The study was conducted in three phases. The first phase was a series of semi-structured interviews involving eight senior human resource personnel from seven major companies based on the Global Intelligence Alliance Classification (GIA) of industry sectors. The aims of the semi-structured interview were to solicit in-depth information based on the three research questions and to probe specific contents for the purpose of formulating relevant items for the survey questionnaire.

### **Phase 2: Survey Questionnaire**

The second phase involved a survey of employers who represented three different industry sectors; namely, the Financial Services, Manufacturing and Industrial, and Telecommunications, Technology & Media. The survey questionnaire, which consists of thirteen items related to the three research questions, was distributed to 150 employers. A total number of 123 employers returned the questionnaire, constituting a return rate of 82%.

### **Phase 3: Seminar**

In the third phase of the study, senior human resource personnel from five major companies participated in a half-day seminar. The main purpose of the seminar was to seek in-depth views from the employers of the salient issues found in the survey results and interviews.

## **DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES OF THE RESPONDENTS**

The samples of participants in the three phases of data collection were selected based on the convenient sampling of companies drawn from three of the fourteen clusters of industry sectors adopted from the Global Intelligence Alliance (GIA) classification (Table 1). The choice of the three industry sectors (Financial Services, Manufacturing and Industrial, and Telecommunications, Technology & Media) was in line with the New Economic Model's (NEM) characteristics of Malaysia in 2020. Furthermore, all three industry sectors are assumed to provide extensive employment prospects for university graduates and command wide-ranging coverage of employment market at the national and global platforms.



**Table 1: Industry Sectors based on the Global Intelligence Alliance (GIA) Classification**

No	Industry Sector
1	Financial Services
2	Manufacturing and Industrial
3	Telecommunications, Technology & Media

### Interview Participants

Senior human resource personnel from eight companies representing three industry sectors were interviewed. The industry sectors were Financial Services (n=3), Manufacturing and Industrial (n=3), and Telecommunications, Technology & Media (n=2).

**Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Industry Sector**

No.	Industry Sector	Total	Percent
1	Manufacturing & Industrial	57	46.3%
2	Financial Services	35	28.50%
3	Telecommunications, Technology & Media	31	25.2%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>100</b>

### Survey Respondents

One hundred and twenty three employers (123) from three industry sectors based on the GIA classification participated in the survey (Table 2); fifty-seven (57) respondents were from the Manufacturing and Industrial industry sector, thirty-five (35) were from the Financial Services sector, and thirty-one (31) were from the Telecommunications, Technology & Media industry sector. Male employers made up 63.1% (n=78) of the respondents, while female employers made up 36.9% (n=45) (Figure 1).

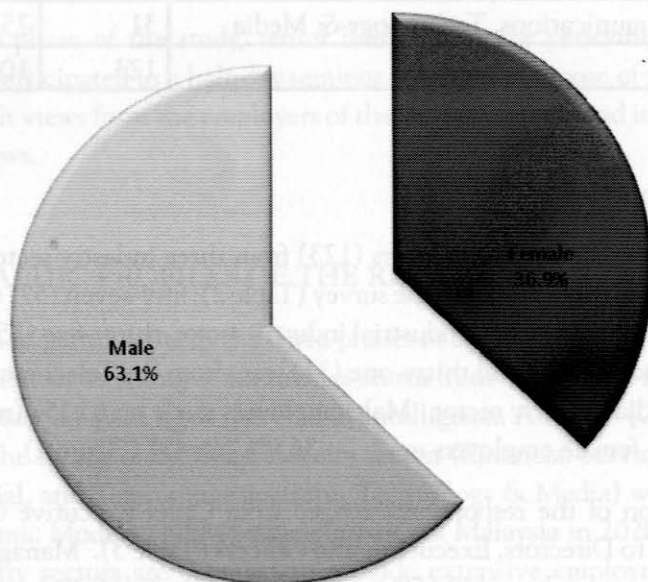
The job designation of the respondents ranged from Chief Executive Officers and General Managers to Directors, Executives and Officers (Table 3). Managers made up the majority of the respondents (40.65%), followed by Heads (16.3%) and Directors/Executive Directors (13%). The job designation was based on the exact information

stated by the respondents in the survey questionnaire.

**Table 3: Job Designation of Survey Respondents**

<b>Job Designation</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Manager	50	40.65
Officer	10	8.13
Executive	8	6.5
Assistant Manager	5	4.06
Head	20	16.30
Director/Executive Director	16	13.0
General Manager	5	4.06
CEO/Deputy CEO/President/V-President	5	4.06
Missing (Job designation not indicated)	4	3.25
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>100</b>

**Figure 1: Distribution of Respondents by Gender**



### Seminar Participants

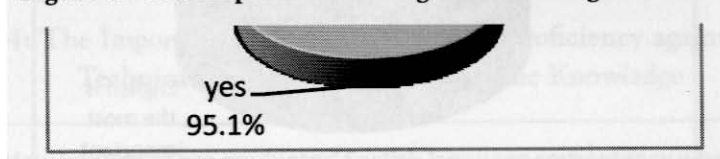
Nine (9) senior human resource personnel representing three (3) industry sectors participated in a half-day seminar. The seminar participants are from the Financial Services (n=4), Manufacturing and Industrial (n=3) and Telecommunications, Technology & Media and Market (n=2). The discussions in the seminar were partly based on issues derived from the findings of the survey.

## FINDINGS

### The Importance of Graduates' English Language Competency in the Industry

In order to investigate the importance of graduates' English language competency in the industry sectors, respondents were asked to respond to four questions. The first question relates to the importance of graduates' English competency in an organisation. Overall, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (95.1%) agreed that graduates' competency in the English language is important in the organisation (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: The Importance of English in an Organisation**

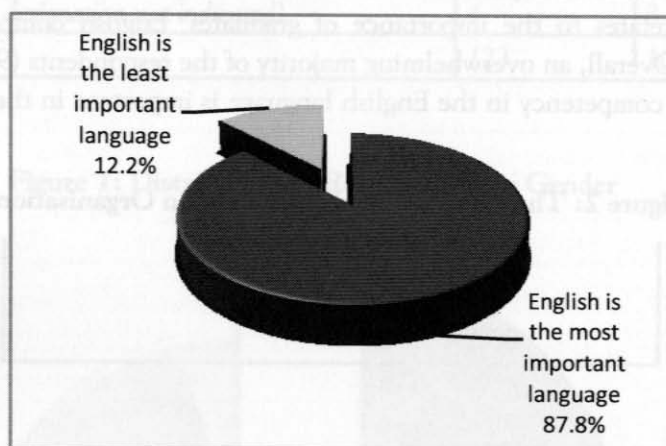


Of the three industry sectors, all respondents (100%) from the Finance Services and Telecommunication, Technology and Media endorsed the importance of English language competency at the workplace, while 89.5% of respondents from the Manufacturing and Industrial industry sector indicated their agreement (Table 4).

**Table 4: The Importance of English in an Organisation by Industry Sectors**

	Is English important in your organisation?	YES (%)	NO (%)
1	Financial Services	100	0
2	Telecommunications, Technology & Media	100	0
3	Manufacturing and Industrial	89.5	1.5

The second question requires the respondents to rank the four main languages (English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil) in terms of their importance in the organisation (Table 4). Overall, 87.80% of respondents ranked English as the most important language in the organisation (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: English as the Most Important Language in the Organisation**

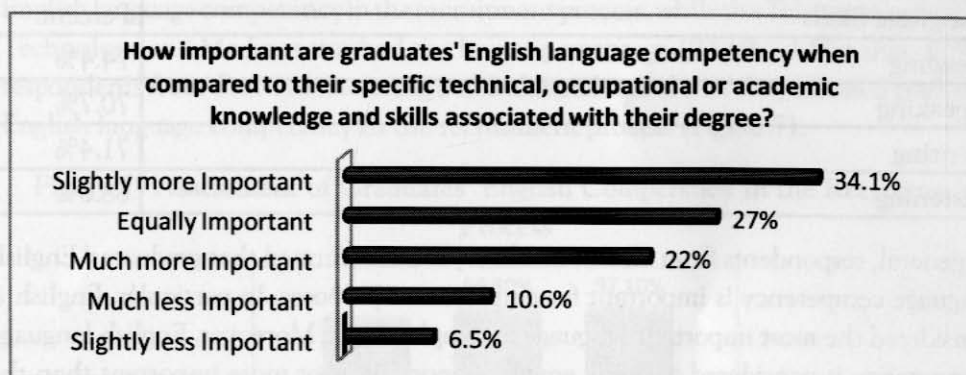
As far as the Financial Services sector is concerned, all respondents (100%) stated English as the most important language in the organization. Bahasa Melayu was equally chosen as the most important language by 8.6% of the respondents from the Financial Services sector (Table 5). Similarly, 93.5% and 12.9% of respondents from Telecommunication, Technology and Media reported English and as Bahasa Melayu as the most important language in the organization respectively. English was also reported as the most important language in the Manufacturing and Industrial sector by 80% of the respondents, while Bahasa Melayu was 32.6% identified English as the most important language. Mandarin was chosen as the most important language by 3.6% of respondents from the Manufacturing and Industrial sector.

**Table 5: The Ranking of English as the most Important Language in the Organisation by Industry Sector**

	Rank the most important language in your organisation	English	Bahasa Melayu	Mandarin
1	Financial Service	100	8.6	0
2	Telecommunications, Technology & Media	93.5	12.9	0
3	Manufacturing and Industrial	80.0	32.6	3.6

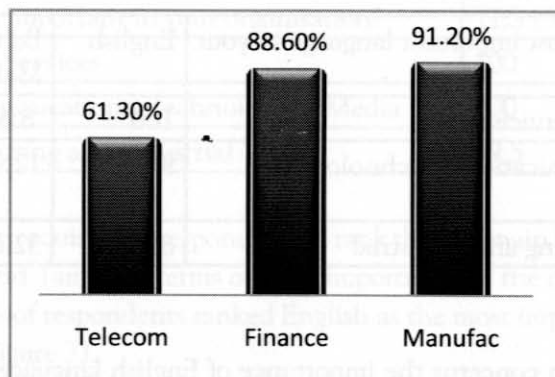
The third question concerns the importance of English language proficiency against graduates' specific technical, occupational or academic knowledge and skills associated with their degree. On average, 83.1% rated English language competency as being equally important as or more important than the knowledge and skills associated with the degree of graduates. Specifically, 34.1% rated English language competency as slightly more important, 27% rated as equally important, and 22% rated as much more important than the knowledge and skills associated with the academic degree of graduates (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: The Importance of English Language Proficiency against Specific Technical, Occupational or Academic Knowledge**



As far as specific industry sectors are concerned, respondents from Manufacturing and Industrial sector recorded the highest percentage of agreement (91.2%), followed by Financial Services (88.6%) and Telecommunications, Technology and Media (61.3%) (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: The Importance of English Language Proficiency against Specific Technical, Occupational or Academic Knowledge by Industry Sectors**



The fourth question relates to the importance of four English language skills in the industry. The results show that 74.4% of the respondents selected Reading as an important English language skill in the industry, followed by Speaking (70.7%), Writing (71.4%) and Listening (68%) (Table 6).

**Table 6: The Importance of English Language Skills**

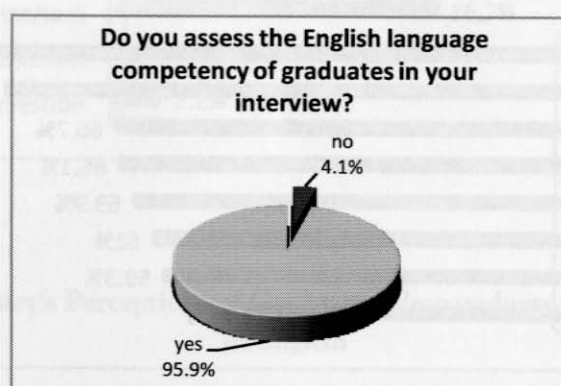
How important are the following English language skills in your organisation?	
Language Skills	Percent
Reading	74.4%
Speaking	70.7%
Writing	71.4%
Listening	68.0%

In general, respondents from all three industry sectors affirmed that graduates' English language competency is important for employment purposes. In particular, English is considered the most important language for employment. Moreover, English language competency is considered as being equally important as or more important than the knowledge and skills associated with the academic degree of the graduates. As far as the industry sectors are concerned, the Financial Services and Manufacturing and Industrial sectors were more pronounced in their views than those from the Telecommunications, Technology and Media sector.

### The Industry's Assessment of Graduates' English Language Competency

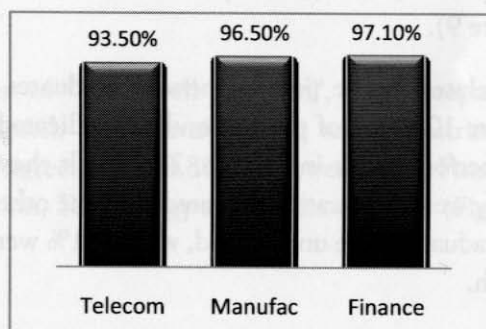
Five questions were formulated to investigate the industry's assessment of graduates' English competency. The first question concerns the industry's assessment of graduates' English competency in the recruitment process. Based on Figure 6, 95.5% of the respondents said that they assessed graduates' English language competency in the recruitment process.

**Figure 6: The Industry's Assessment of Candidates' English Competency in the Recruitment Process**



A total of 97.1% of respondents from the Financial Services sector assessed graduates' English language competency in the recruitment process, while the Telecommunication, Technology and Media sector had the lowest percentage (93.5%). More than 96% of respondents from the Manufacturing and Industrial stated that they assessed graduates' English language competency in the recruitment process (Figure 7).

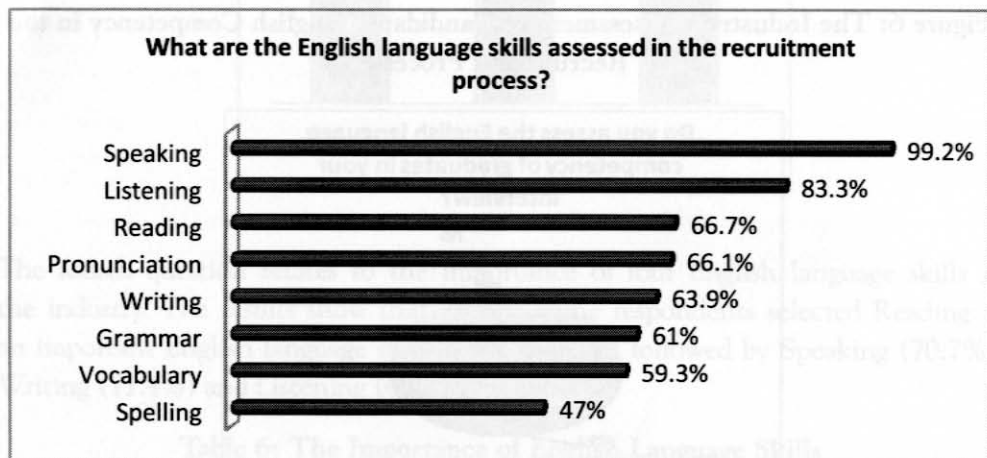
**Figure 7: Assessment of Graduates' English Competency in the Recruitment Process**





The second question relates to the industry's assessment of English language skills in the recruitment process. The finding indicates that Speaking is assessed in the recruitment process by 99.2% of the respondents, followed by Listening (83.3%) Writing (63.9%), Pronunciation (66.1%), Reading (66.7%), Grammar (61%), Vocabulary (59.3%), and Spelling (47.5%) (Figure 8).

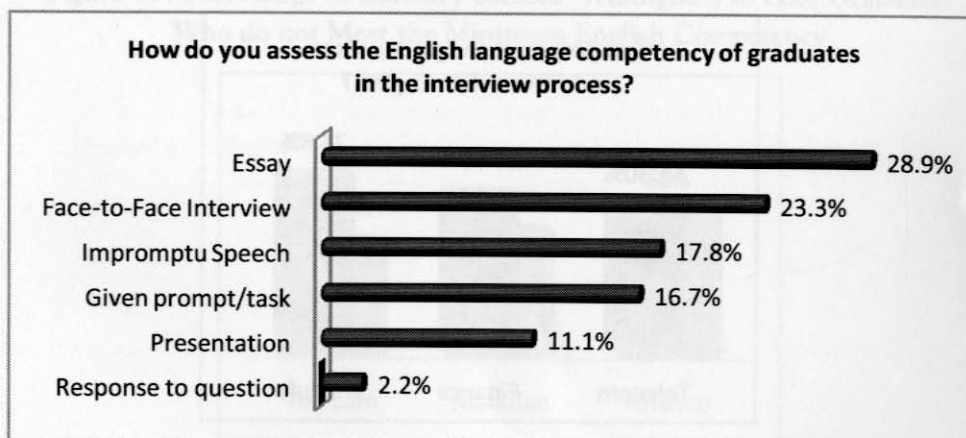
**Figure 8: English Language Skills Assessed in the Recruitment Process**



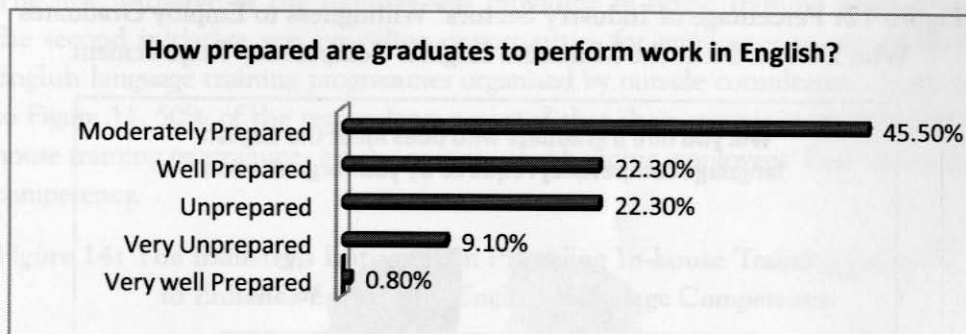
The third question is on the types of tasks graduates are asked to perform in the recruitment process in order to demonstrate their English language competency. The respondents identified seven task types; namely, essay writing, debate, verbal response to prompts, oral presentation, impromptu speech, response to specific questions in interview and face-to-face interview. In addition to the seven tasks, the respondents were asked to indicate other tasks used by their respective industry or organisation. English competency assessment task with the highest percentage of agreement was essay writing (28.9 %), followed by face-to-face interview (23.3%), prompts/tasks (16.7%), impromptu speech (17.8%), oral presentation (11.1%) and responses to questions (2.2%) (Figure 9).

The fourth question relates to the preparedness of graduates to perform work in English. Based on Figure 10, 0.8% of the respondents indicated that graduates were very well-prepared to perform work in English, 22.3% felt they were well-prepared, and 45.5% thought they were moderately prepared. On the other hand, 22.3% of the respondents felt that graduates were unprepared, while 9.1% were very unprepared to perform work in English.

**Figure 9: Methods of Assessing Candidates' English Language Proficiency in the Recruitment Process**

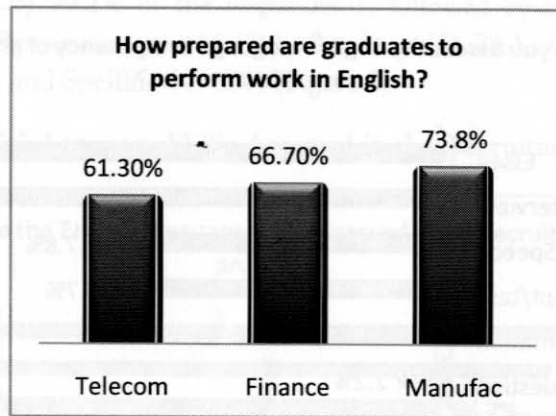


**Figure 10: Industry's Perceptions of Graduates' Preparedness to Perform Work in English**



When the responses of “very well-prepared”, “well-prepared” and “moderately prepared” were collapsed, the Manufacturing and Industrial sector registered the highest percentage of agreement (73.8%), followed by the Financial Services (66.7%) and Telecommunication, Technology and Media (61.3%) (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Industry's Perceptions of Graduates' Preparedness to Perform Work in English**



The fifth question is on the willingness of industry sectors to employ graduates who do not meet the minimum English language competency required by the industry. The respondents were divided in their opinion. In general, 46.3% stated that they would not hire candidates who do not meet the minimum English language competency required by their organisation (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Percentage of Industry Sectors' Willingness to Employ Graduates Who Do Not Meet the Minimum English Competency Requirement**

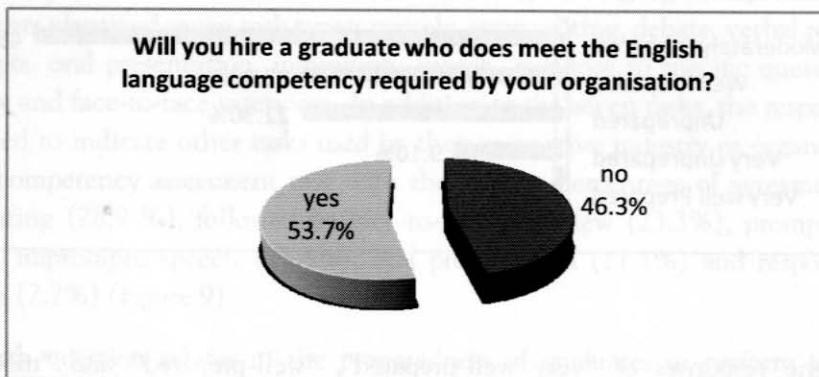
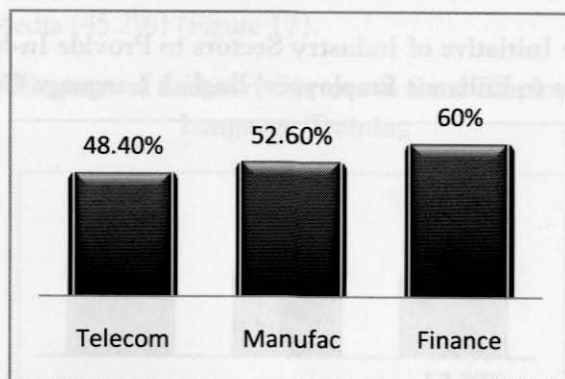


Figure 13 shows that there were more respondents in the Financial Services sector (60%) who indicated their willingness to employ graduates who do not meet the minimum English language competency, than those in the Manufacturing and Industrial Sector (52.6%), and Telecommunications, Technology, and Media sector

(48.4%).

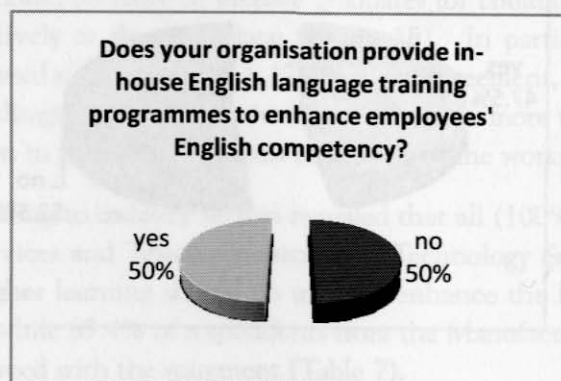
**Figure 13: Percentage of Industry Sectors' Willingness to Hire Graduates Who do not Meet the Minimum English Competency**



### **The Industry's Initiatives to Enhance Employees' English Language Competency**

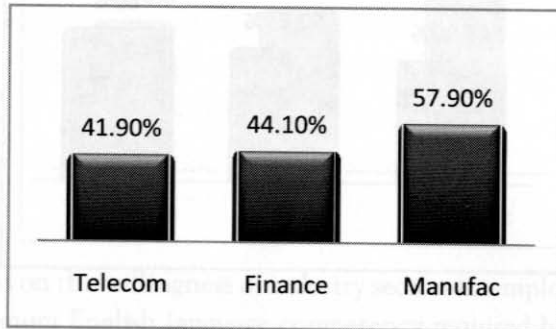
Findings of the study indicate that the industry has embarked on two types of initiatives in order to enhance the English language competency of their employees. The first initiative of the industry was providing in-house training programs and the second initiative was providing opportunities for employees to attend further English language training programmes organised by outside consultants. According to Figure 11, 50% of the respondents reported that their organisations provided in-house training programmes for the purpose of enhancing employees' English language competency.

**Figure 14: The Industry's Initiatives in Providing In-house Training Programmes to Enhance Employees' English Language Competency**



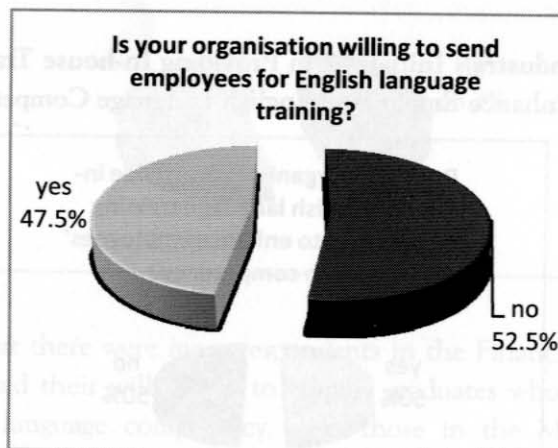
A total of 57.9% of respondents from the Manufacturing and Industry sector indicated that their organisations provided in-house English language training programmes, followed by the Financial Services sector (44.1%) and the Telecommunication, Technology and Media sector (41.9%) (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: The Initiative of Industry Sectors to Provide In-house Training Programmes to Enhance Employees' English Language Competency**



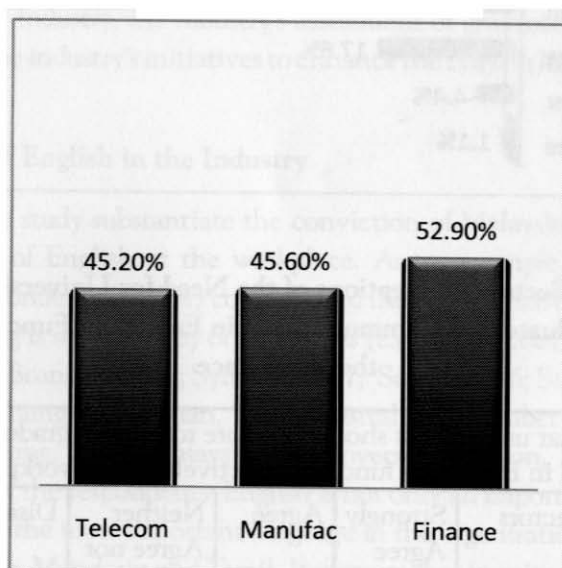
The second initiative to enhance the English language competency of employees reported by the respondents was providing opportunities for employees to attend English language training programmes organised by outside consultants. According to Figure 16, 52.5% of the respondents said that they were willing to send employees for training to enhance their English language competency.

**Figure 16: The Industry's Willingness to Send Employees for English Language Training**



Overall, respondents from the Financial Services sector had the highest percentage of agreement (52.9%) in terms of providing opportunities for employees to attend English language training programmes conducted by outside consultants, followed by the Manufacturing and Industrial sector (45.6%), and Telecommunications, Technology and Media (45.2%) (Figure 17).

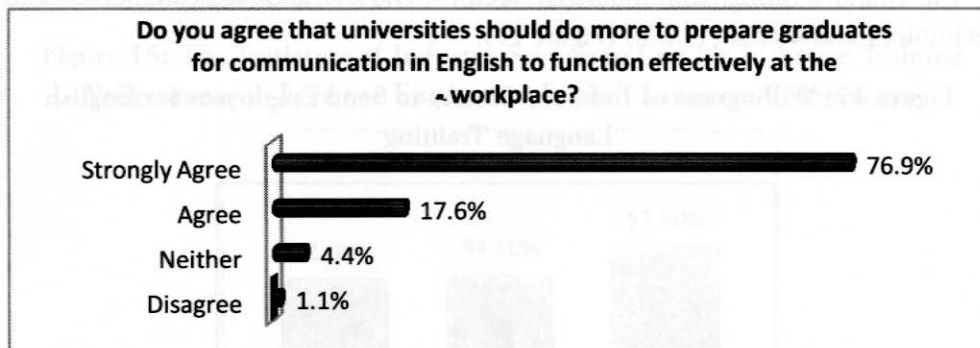
**Figure 17: Willingness of Industry Sectors to Send Employees for English Language Training**



The final question asked was, “Do you agree that universities should do more to prepare graduates for communication in English to function effectively at the workplace?” An overwhelming majority of the respondents (94.5%) agreed that institutions of higher learning should do more to prepare graduates for communication in English to function effectively at the workplace (Figure 18). In particular, 76.9% of the respondents indicated strong agreement, 17.6% was in agreement, 4.4% was uncertain, and 1.1% was in disagreement that universities should do more to prepare graduates for communication in English to function effectively at the workplace.

The finding according to industry sectors revealed that all (100%) respondents from the Financial Services and Telecommunications, Technology & Media agreed that institutions of higher learning should do more to enhance the English competency of the graduates, while 89.4% of respondents from the Manufacturing and Industrial industry sector agreed with the statement (Table 7).

**Figure 18: Industry Sectors' Perceptions of the Need for Universities to do more to Prepare their Graduates for Communication in English to Function Effectively at the Workplace**



**Table 7: Industry Sectors' Perceptions of the Need for Universities to do more to Prepare their Graduates for Communication in English to Function Effectively at the Workplace**

Do you agree that universities should do more to prepare graduates for communication in English to function effectively at the workplace?						
	Industry Sectors	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Financial Services	96.3	3.7	0	0	0
2	Telecommunications, Technology & Media	76.5	23.5	0	0	0
3	Manufacturing and Industrial	66.0	23.4	8.5	2.1	0

The initiatives of half of the employers to provide in-house training programmes and opportunities for employees to attend English language training programmes conducted by outside consultants insinuate the apprehension of the industry of the English language competency of graduates. Thus, it is not surprising that nearly



all respondents (94.5%) were of the opinion that the universities should do more to prepare graduates for communication in English to function effectively at the workplace.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study was conducted to investigate the importance of graduate's English language competency in the industry, the industry's assessment of graduates' English language competency, and the industry's initiatives to enhance the English language competency of employees.

### The Importance of English in the Industry

The findings of the study substantiate the conviction of Malaysian employers of the indispensable role of English at the workplace. As an example, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (94.5%) corroborated the importance of English in the job market. This finding is supported by other studies (e.g. Shyla, 2007; Birmingham Post, 2007; Lewis, 2007; Bronson, 2007; Syrquin, 2007; Smith, 2006; Stumpf, 2007; Butler, 2006; Baxter & Young 1982; Suan, 2004; Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002; Chang, 2004; Malaysian Employers Federation, 2004). Apparently, according to 85% of the respondents, English is not only an important language at the workplace, but also the most important language in the organisation, more important than Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin and Tamil. It suggests that in spite of the official status of Bahasa Melayu as the national language, English remains the main language of communication in the industry.

It was also discovered that almost 80% of the employers indicated that English language proficiency is equally important as or more important than the specific technical, occupational or academic knowledge and skills associated with a candidate's academic degree. This is not a surprising finding because the literature on employability and job qualifications for college graduates and job performance indicators supports the importance of generic employability skills above specific occupational skills (Chang, 2004; Cotton, 2001; & Natriello, 1989). A manager from the Telecommunications, Technology and Media sector commented:

*We organize many international events...so everything we do is in English. (We) deal with international clients or different governments of the world. Even local (clients) prefer to speak in English.*

Similarly, a vice-president of a bank remarked:

*... (the) banking sector requires people who can write well, as well as (people who are) good in oral communication (because the) job requires (the employees) to interact in English.*

These testimonies from industry representatives affirm the important role of English at the workplace.

It is important that this finding is made known to students to ensure that they are cognisant of the reality of the job market and, therefore, more resolved in the efforts to enhance their English language competency. This is especially true considering that most university students have four years to complete their academic undertaking. Bearing in mind that 29% of students who had gained entrance into institutions of higher learning came in with Band 1 (extremely limited user of English) and Band 2 (limited user of English) based on the Malaysia University English Test (MUET) (Hamidah Atan, 2007), it will be an uphill task for institutions of higher learning, particularly, for institutions that do not use English as the language of instruction and communication to produce graduates with the English language competency required by the industry.

### **The Industry's Assessment of Graduates' English Language Competency**

The importance of English competency at the workplace is manifested in the industry's assessment of graduates' English language competency. For instance, 93% of respondents in this study reported that they assessed graduates' English language competency in the recruitment process. Although reading, writing, speaking and listening skills are important skills for the workplace (Table 6), these skills are not reflected in the English language skills assessed in the recruitment process. According to the findings, almost 70% of the English language skills assessed was based on the speaking skill (face-to-face interviews, spoken prompts or given tasks, impromptu speeches, oral presentations, and debates), while 30% is based on the writing skill (essay writing). The finding suggests that only speaking and writing skills are directly assessed in the recruitment process.

Findings from the interviews and a half-day seminar revealed that the receptive skills, (reading and listening) are not assessed directly in the recruitment process because the assessment of writing and speaking skills allows for a more direct and efficient

on-the-spot assessment. Based on the transcripts of the seminar, one of the heads of the human resource department from the Financial Services sector, for example, reiterated:

*I can assess (a candidate's English competency) on the spot when he explains (or write) something ... It's difficult to evaluate his listening (proficiency) in English or ... whether his reading in English is ok... We are more concerned if he can speak or write in English...*

Based on the industry's assessment of graduates' preparedness to perform work in English, 23.1% of Malaysian university graduates were considered well-prepared and very well-prepared and 45.5% to be moderately prepared, while 31.4% considered poorly prepared. The finding indirectly suggests that out of 10 candidates, only 2 were considered clearly meeting the speaking and writing competency required by the industry. The findings provide the empirical evidence to support the contention of Malaysian employers that there is a need to enhance the speaking and writing competency of 80% of the graduates, particularly, those who are poorly prepared (31.4%). This is to narrow the gap between the English language competency required for employment and the actual English language competency of job applicants (Hafizoah & Fatimah, 2010; Chang, 2004; Suan, 2004; Malaysian Employers Federation, 2004).

The importance of emphasizing the productive skills (speaking and writing) for employment is supported by other studies (Nurita et al, 2007; Suan, 2004; Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002; Chang, 2004; Malaysian Employers Federation, 2004). Thus, it is essential that university English language courses and English language enrichment programmes such as the Finishing School, English Language Enhancement or English for Occupational Purposes provide ample opportunities for students to exploit their writing and speaking skills by actually requiring them to intensely write and speak in English. It is disconcerting to observe that many English language enriching programmes seem to employ a teacher-centred approach in dealing with employability modules such as business writing, public speaking or job interviews, thus rendering insufficient opportunities for students to actually demonstrate their ability to perform in English. The findings of this study, which espouse the needs for speaking and writing, ought to compel English language programme providers to adopt a student-centred approach in order to boost students' English language competency and self-confidence. The public speaking maxim, "if you fail to practise, then you practise to fail," is fittingly applicable in this situation, especially when students are not given sufficient practice, for example, to present

orally, write multiple drafts of application letters or role play job interviews, in spite of spending hours preparing for the content. As a result, students generally produce a substandard performance, and the scenario is likely to be repeated when the students are required to perform during job interviews. It has to be pointed out that the focus on the productive skills does not deemphasise the teaching of grammar and pronunciation for effective speaking and writing will come about in unison with proper grammar and acceptable pronunciation.

### **The Industry's Initiatives to Enhance Employees English Language Competency**

The third key issue relates to the initiatives of the industry to enhance employees' English language competency. The importance of English at the workplace is noticeably stressed by Malaysian employers whereby 50% reported that they provide English language training for their employees, while 47.5% are willing to send newly recruited staff for training to enhance their English competency. This is a meaningful finding for the reason that developing a training programme requires substantial long-term investment in terms of financial and human resources. Therefore, the industry's efforts should be applauded. Conceivably, employers who do not have their own training programmes would be the ones to send their employees for English language training. Thus, based on the findings of the survey, seminar and semi-structured interviews, it was a revelation to discover that organisations that provide in-house training programmes are more likely to send their newly recruited staff for further training than those without any in-house training programme. Findings of the interviews and seminar revealed that organisations with in-house programmes were more cognisant of the value of the English language enhancement training programmes as a critical measure to advance the quality of their human capital. Apparently, the same employers were likely to advocate efforts to enhance their employees' English competency conducted by legitimate program providers.

It is also interesting to note that those respondents who stated that they assessed graduates' English competency using the in-house assessment instrument rationalised that they were compelled to develop their own in-house workplace assessment simply because graduates' English competency based on the English language scores in the SPM (high school leaving standardised examination), university English language courses or MUET were deemed less reliable. Findings from the seminar and semi-structured interviews suggest that a graduate's excellent performance in the English language subject in SPM, university English language courses or MUET does not

usually translate into an excellent performance in English during the interview process. Based on the transcripts of the seminar, a human resource director from the Manufacturing and Industrial sector pointed out:

*We use SPM or MUET as a benchmark ... but the problem (is) when we ask the candidates to explain (in English) they failed miserably.*

Another human resource manager from the Financial Services sector remarked:

*Nowadays, getting 7As or 8As is normal, and sometimes (it) does not translate into an actual ability... it's a baseline, but it does not really translate into a an excellent performance.*

It is not surprising to find out that at least half of the industry sectors have been pro-active in providing in-house training programmes or sending their employees for further training. This effort, however, needs to be intensified for the reason that small and medium (SMI) industry may not have the financial and human resources to develop and manage their own training centres.

In view of the importance of English at the workplace, the concern of the English language competency of graduates, and the initiatives of the industry to enhance the English language competency of their employees, an overwhelming majority of the industry sectors (94.5%) felt that institutions of higher learning had not done enough to prepare the graduates for communication in English to function effectively at the workplace. Although the finding is expected, the high percentage of discontentment is very alarming, taking into consideration that institutions of higher learning have undertaken pro-active measures to enhance graduates' competency in English in the form of the Finishing School Programme, English Language Enhancement Programme, Intensive English Language Programme, and the reintroduction of English as the medium of instruction for technical, science and highly strategic-based programmes (Isarji et al, 2008). Perhaps this is an accurate manifestation of not only the gaps between the standards of English required by the industry and the standards attained by the students, but also the incompatibility between the goals of education and the aspirations of the industry. Nonetheless, depending on the needs and constraints of the respective higher education institutions, program providers at the tertiary level must redouble their efforts and genuinely adopt different approaches to enhance students' English language competency such as by embedding skills associated with English for employment purposes in all faculty courses, offering relevant stand-alone English language courses and programmes, or combining both approaches.



In summary, the findings of the study entail that graduates do need to be very competent in English if they plan to embark on a successful career in the industry, particularly, in the Financial Services, Manufacturing and Industrial, and Telecommunications, Technology & Media industry sectors for the reason that the three industry sectors perceived English competency as an indispensable asset in their organisations. Notwithstanding, the Telecommunications, Technology, and Media sector, is less stringent than the Manufacturing and Industrial sector in assessing graduates' English language competency. The Financial Services sector, on the contrary, is more rigorous and unrelenting in assessing and enhancing graduates' English language competency.

## CONCLUSION

English will always be the most important language at the workplace unless the industry readily adopts or is obligated to embrace the national language as the main language of communication. The findings of this study substantiate the assertion that competency in the English language is an indispensable employability skill and a prerequisite in demonstrating effective communication skills for employment purposes. Justifiably, employers are concerned that graduates' lack of English competency may jeopardise the core of their business intelligence. Hence, the industry has been pro-active in enhancing employees' English language competency not only by providing the needed in-house training programmes but also by sending employees to undergo English language training offered by outside organisations. The industry's effort is commendable; however, there is a need to encourage more organisations to establish English language training programmes or provide full funding for employees to attend English language training conducted by outside consultants. Likewise, institutions of higher learning need to re-evaluate their efforts and be more rigorous in employing different approaches in providing the right English competency training for their graduates. Ultimately, the constructive synergy between the industry and the institutions of higher learning is crucial in preparing graduates with the skills associated with the English competency of graduates for the 21st century workplace, who form the core of the business intelligence.

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