BRIDGING THE EMPLOYABILITY GAP: ESL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AMONG MALAYSIAN YOUTH

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Abstract. English language proficiency has become a key determinant of employability in Malaysia, particularly in professional contexts where effective communication is essential for workplace interaction, collaboration, and career advancement. Despite holding academic qualifications, many Malaysian youth continue to experience difficulties in securing employment due to limitations in ESL communicative competence. This issue reflects a persistent mismatch between graduates' communicative abilities and industry expectations, where workplace communication skills are increasingly prioritised in recruitment and professional performance. This study examines ESL communicative competence among Malaysian youth and its alignment with employability. Communicative competence is conceptualised based on Canale and Swain's (1980) framework, comprising linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies. A quantitative research design is employed, and data are collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to Malaysian youth. The instrument measures the four dimensions of ESL communicative sub-competencies. Data are analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), involving descriptive statistical analysis to determine the level of each sub-competency and identify patterns across dimensions of communicative performance in relation to employability outcomes. The findings are expected to provide empirical insights into the levels of ESL communicative sub-competencies among Malaysian youth in relation to workplace communication demands. Specifically, the study is anticipated to highlight variations in linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence, contributing to a clearer understanding of communicative strengths and deficiencies. The study is expected to inform educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in enhancing English language instruction and improving youth readiness for communication demands in contemporary professional environments and increasingly competitive globalised labour markets.
Keywords: *English as Second Language (ESL), communicative competence, employability, job interview, mismatch*

Introduction

English language proficiency has become an essential component of employability in Malaysia, particularly in professional sectors where effective communication is required for workplace interaction, collaboration, and career advancement. In the Malaysian context, English functions as a second language and plays a significant role in shaping youth readiness for the job market. Effective communication is widely regarded as a critical employability attribute in contemporary professional environments. Despite possessing academic qualifications, many Malaysian youth continue to face difficulties in securing employment due to limitations in ESL communicative competence. Accordingly, the unemployment rate remained at 2.9 per cent in the fourth month of the year, reflecting ongoing labour market challenges. Employers frequently report that Malaysian youth demonstrate inadequate ability to use English effectively in professional contexts, particularly in speaking interaction, presentation, negotiation, and professional discourse. This reflects a broader concern regarding the preparedness of Malaysian youth for communication-intensive work environments. This situation

highlights a persistent mismatch between Malaysian youth ESL communicative competence and industry expectations, where employers prioritise workplace communication skills while graduates may not fully meet these demands. In the globalised workforce, English serves as a lingua franca in business and professional domains, making communicative competence increasingly important for employability (Jeong, 2021; Rajprasit et al., 2022; Ting et al., 2021). As a result, communicative competence has become an essential employability attribute rather than a supplementary skill. Communicative competence, as conceptualised by Canale and Swain (1980), extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic dimensions. This multidimensional framework emphasises the ability to use language appropriately, effectively, and flexibly across varying communicative contexts. In the Malaysian context, English proficiency is also viewed as a form of socio-economic capital that influences educational attainment and career progression (Ishak et al., 2025). However, persistent challenges in ESL classrooms and the prevalence of colloquial language practices often limit learners' exposure to standardised forms of English (Teh, 2025). Although communicative competence has been widely discussed in second language acquisition literature, many studies continue to emphasise general language proficiency rather than its specific dimensions in relation to employability. There is limited empirical integration of communicative competence frameworks with employability outcomes, particularly within the Malaysian context. Therefore, this study aims to examine ESL communicative competence among Malaysian youth across its four dimensions and its relationship with employability, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how communicative competence influences workplace readiness.

Problem statement

The employability of Malaysian youth remains a pressing concern, particularly in relation to ESL communicative competence. Skills mismatch continues to influence youth unemployment, reflecting an imbalance between the competencies possessed by graduates and those required by industries (Mohd Salahuddin et al., 2023). Previous studies have consistently shown that Malaysian youth face difficulties in using English effectively in workplace contexts. Ismail (2011) found that graduates often have difficulties with workplace communication, while Tan et al. (2016) reported challenges in expressing ideas during job interviews. Although Malaysian graduates possess academic qualifications, employers continue to report deficiencies in English communication skills in professional environments. This reinforces a persistent mismatch between youth communicative competence and industry expectations, particularly in recruitment and workplace performance contexts. Prior research has largely focused on general English proficiency rather than ESL communicative competence in workplace-specific domains such as presentations, professional interaction, and discourse management. Mohamad et al. (2024) further noted that limited motivation and engagement with English learning continue to affect communicative development among learners. In addition, although employability is influenced by both academic achievement and soft skills, communication remains one of the most critical components. Youth preparing to enter the professional settings face significant constraints, including limited access to digital resources and reduced opportunities for authentic language practice (Khamis et al., 2024; Sulong et al., 2024). Despite extensive discussion on graduate skill mismatch (Nadarajah, 2021; Ong et al.,

2022; Yong and Ling, 2023), there remains limited empirical focus on ESL communicative competence as a multidimensional construct in relation to employability outcomes. This indicates a clear research gap in quantitative studies that systematically examine ESL communicative competence across its four dimensions and its relationship with employability among Malaysian youth.

Therefore, there is a clear need for a more comprehensive investigation into ESL communicative competence among Malaysian youth and its alignment with employability. Addressing this gap is essential for identifying specific communicative deficiencies that contribute to employability challenges and for informing targeted educational interventions. Ultimately, this study aims to enhance understanding of how ESL communicative competence in English influences youth readiness for contemporary professional settings and contributes to bridging the employability gap in Malaysia. The study specifically focuses on ESL communicative sub-competencies, namely linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. In line with this objective, the present study is guided by the following research question: (RQ1): What are the levels of ESL communicative sub-competencies among Malaysian youth, specifically linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence?

Literature review

Communicative competence refers to an individual's ability to use language effectively and appropriately across social, academic, and professional contexts. The evolution of this concept is rooted in the contrasting perspectives of Chomsky (1957) and Hymes (1971). Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence focuses primarily on an idealised speaker's internal grammatical knowledge, largely separating competence from the act of performance. In contrast, Hymes (1971) expanded this view by introducing communicative competence, emphasising that language use is fundamentally context-dependent and socially situated. Hymes argued against the foundational dichotomy between competence and performance, suggesting that effective communication requires not only grammatical knowledge but also the sociolinguistic ability to select appropriate language based on context, interlocutors, and communicative purpose. Following this theoretical evolution, Canale and Swain (1980) operationalised communicative competence into a multidimensional construct consisting of four interrelated sub-competencies specifically categorised as linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. These components collectively enable speakers to convey meaning clearly, maintain interactional flow, and achieve communicative goals in authentic professional contexts. In the present study, this framework is examined in relation to English language use among Malaysian youth, with a particular emphasis on professional communication performance and employability outcomes. The structural relationship between these dimensions as proposed by Michael Canale and Merrill Swain is illustrated in *Figure 1*.

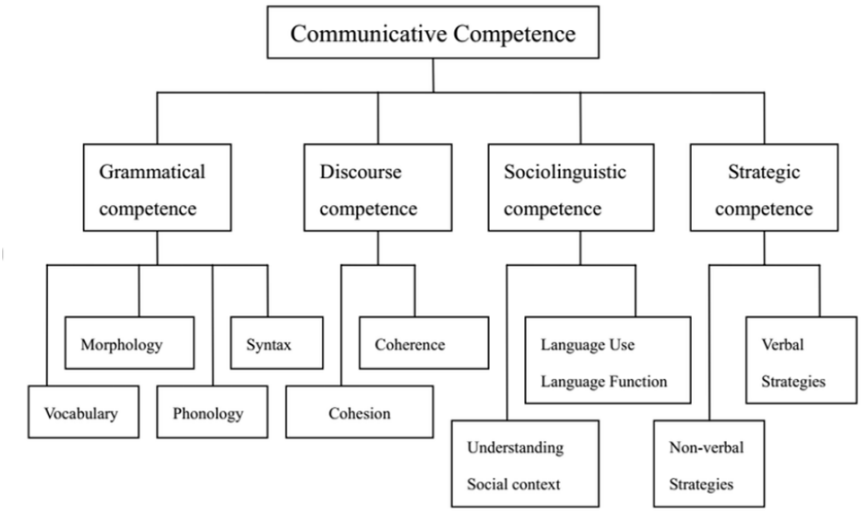

Figure 1. *Communicative competence theoretical framework of ESL communicative competence based on Canale and Swain (1980).*

Building upon these foundational pillars, Terogo et al. (2018) further expand the conceptualisation of linguistic competence by incorporating vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation, phonetics, and phonology. This perspective argues that language knowledge must be understood as a broader system of communicative resources rather than isolated grammatical rules. By viewing these components as integrated resources, the model supports a more comprehensive evaluation of language proficiency in professional communication contexts. The expansion of linguistic resources within this framework is presented in *Figure 2*.

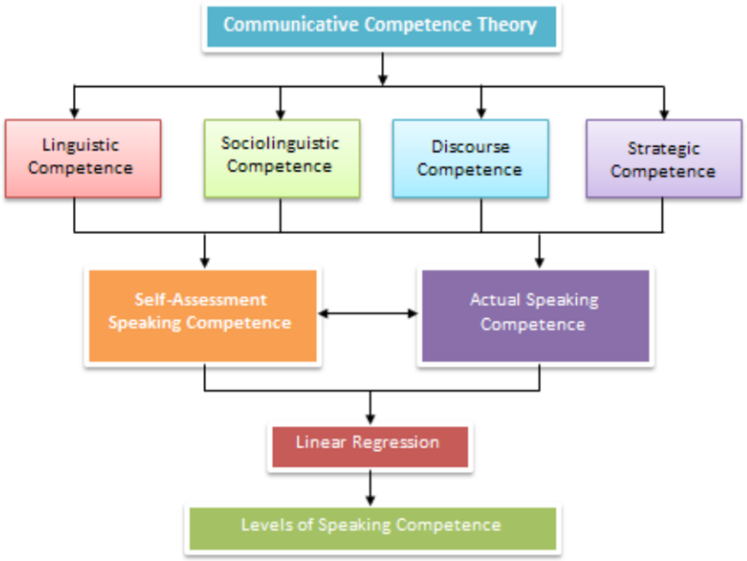

Figure 2. *Communicative competence theory based on Terogo et al. (2018)*

In professional settings, communicative competence plays a crucial role in enabling individuals to perform essential professional tasks such as presenting ideas and

collaborating effectively. Kenayathulla et al. (2019) highlight that although youth may possess strong technical knowledge, many lack essential employability skills such as interpersonal competence. Similarly, Junn (2023) emphasises that strategic competence is particularly important for managing communication breakdowns in professional environments. Empirical evidence suggests that communication difficulties among youth are persistent, particularly in English-language job interviews. Palpanadan and Ahmad (2018) identify limited vocabulary and inadequate practice as key factors contributing to weak oral skills, indicating that competence must extend beyond grammatical accuracy to include fluency and adaptability.

Industry-related studies consistently report a mismatch between youth communication skills and employer expectations. Employers often emphasise the importance of clarity and professionalism, while youth tend to overestimate their readiness based on academic achievement alone (Holidi and Seman, 2023). This mismatch is further influenced by socio-educational and psychological factors, including mismatch motivation and exposure to English outside formal environments (Mohamad et al., 2024; Pudin et al., 2021). Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by examining how the specific dimensions of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence contribute to professional readiness and employability outcomes.

Materials and Methods

A quantitative approach was adopted, incorporating structured sampling, research instruments, and comprehensive data collection and analysis.

Research design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine ESL communicative competence among Malaysian youth in relation to the employability gap. A survey approach was selected to capture a standard, measurable snapshot of self-perceived linguistic behaviours at a single point in time. Quantitative data were collected from 385 Malaysian youth to assess their self-perceived levels of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. This provided a broad, statistically significant baseline of the participants' communicative abilities. The quantitative results provide measurable evidence of competence levels.

Sampling

The target population comprises Malaysian youth aged between 18 to 37 years old who are either transitioning from tertiary institutions and currently seeking employment. To balance practical constraints with demographic accuracy, a stratified convenience sampling technique was deployed. While convenience sampling allowed for the rapid collection of data via accessible digital networks and institutional platforms, stratification was deliberately enforced across key demographic sub-groups, specifically Malaysians from different states in the country that consists of Malay, Chinese, Indian and Bumiputera. The target population of this study consists of Malaysian youth, which represents a large and indefinite population. As the exact number of individuals within this category cannot be precisely determined, Cochran's formula for large populations was applied to determine the minimum required sample size (Cochran, 1977). The formula is expressed as follows:

$$N_0 = \frac{Z^{2p} p(1-p)}{e^2} \qquad \text{Eq. (1)}$$

Where, Z=1.96 (1.96 for 95% confidence level), p=0.5 (maximum variability assumption), and N0=0.05 (margin of error). Based on the calculation, the minimum required sample size was 384.16, which was rounded up to 385 respondents to ensure adequacy and statistical reliability. A survey questionnaire was distributed online to Malaysian youth who are transitioning between education and employment, particularly those preparing for job entry or currently seeking employment. Online distribution was selected due to its efficiency in reaching geographically dispersed respondents and its suitability for large-scale data collection.

Instrument

The research utilised a primary instrument to address the multidimensional nature of ESL communicative competence. The instrument was a structured quantitative questionnaire developed to examine ESL communicative competence among Malaysian youth in relation to the job interviews that they had experienced. This instrument was built upon established frameworks, specifically Canale and Swain's communicative competence model, and consisted of 17 items measuring linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: the first collected demographic data such as age, gender, the current employment status, field of study and area of residence to provide contextual background, while the second measured the four sub-competencies using a five-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932). This five-point format was selected because it provides a neutral midpoint, which reduces respondent frustration and enhances data quality by allowing participants to express a non-committal stance when necessary (Adelson and McCoach, 2010). Furthermore, five-point scales are widely recognised for their ability to provide sufficient granularity for statistical analysis while remaining easily understood by respondents in self-perceptual studies (Dawes, 2008). To ensure clarity and reduce comprehension bias, the questionnaire was administered in both English and Malay. This bilingual approach is particularly effective in the Malaysian context for enhancing response accuracy and reducing self-reporting bias (Ting et al., 2021). Before the full data collection began, the instrument underwent a pilot test where internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. In the final study, the instrument yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.923, confirming that the items were highly reliable for capturing both general ability and employability-related communication skills.

Data collection

The data collection process was conducted in the study. The 17-item questionnaire was distributed digitally to Malaysian youth via online platforms. Participants were provided with a brief overview of the research and were required to provide informed consent before proceeding to the survey. This digital distribution ensured a broad reach and facilitated the gathering of 385 completed responses over a four-week period. Once the survey data were collected and preliminary mean scores were identified.

Data analysis

Data analysis was performed using a combination of statistical and thematic techniques to integrate the findings from both research phases. The quantitative data were processed and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29.0) to perform descriptive statistics and internal consistency reliability tests. Descriptive statistics, specifically Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD), were calculated to determine the levels of self-perceived linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence among the youth respondents. The internal consistency of the items was further verified using Cronbach's alpha to ensure the reliability of the measurements before interpretation. To establish the internal consistency and reliability of the research instrument, Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis was executed using IBM SPSS Statistics. According to Cronbach (1951), this coefficient evaluates the internal consistency and inter-relatedness of items within a scale. In alignment with thresholds proposed by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), a Cronbach's alpha value equal to or greater than 0.70 was utilized as the benchmark for acceptable reliability.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented with the quantitative assessment of youth self-perceived competence and observed communicative gaps. The research objective by assessing the self perceived levels of ESL communicative competence among 385 Malaysian youth. *Table 1* presents the mean, median, and standard deviation for the four core dimensions.

Table 1. *Mean scores and standard deviation of communicative sub-competencies (N=385).*

Category	Mean	Median	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Linguistic Competence	3.75	4.00	0.850	1.20	5.00
Sociolinguistic Competence	3.79	3.75	0.801	1.25	5.00
Discourse Competence	3.81	3.75	0.778	1.75	5.00
Strategic Competence	3.94	4.00	0.792	1.25	5.00

The quantitative phase of this study addressed the research objective by assessing the self-perceived levels of ESL communicative competence among 385 Malaysian youth. Overall, the results indicate that respondents generally perceive their English communication abilities positively, with all four mean scores falling within the agreed threshold of 3.41 to 4.20 on the five point Likert scale. Linguistic competence yielded a mean score of (M = 3.75, SD = 0.850), representing the lowest perceived ability and the highest level of variability among respondents. This was followed by sociolinguistic competence (M = 3.79, SD = 0.801) and discourse competence (M = 3.81, SD = 0.778). Strategic competence recorded the highest mean score (M = 3.94, SD = 0.792), suggesting that Malaysian youth feel most confident in their ability to use compensatory strategies to maintain communication flow. These findings establish a baseline of high self perceived confidence. While the results establish that Malaysian youth possess a high level of self-perceived communicative competence, these scores represent a generalized self-assessment.

The findings of this research highlight a critical perceptual mismatch between the self-perceived ESL communicative competence of Malaysian youth. This mismatch is best characterised as a competence paradox where high levels of self-assurance among youth do not necessarily translate into professional readiness. The quantitative data indicates that youth generally agree they are competent across all dimensions, particularly in strategic competence where the mean score reached 3.94. A primary area

of divergence is found in the dimension of strategic competence. Although youth participants rated this as their strongest area, recruiters identified a significant failure in strategic adaptability during high-pressure interactions. This dependency indicates that youth may lack the cognitive and linguistic flexibility required to handle spontaneous and complex inquiries. Furthermore, the reliance on informal fillers and interactional noise such as um and like, which youth use to buy time, is interpreted by industry experts as a sign of insecurity rather than a valid communication strategy. According to Hasan and Dunn (2005), interactional breakdowns or pragmatic noise occur in graduate interviews because the candidate's content and relationship components fail to align with the employer's expectations, causing severe miscommunication. The study further identifies a gap in sociolinguistic awareness and professional etiquette. While youth feel comfortable using English in general settings, recruiters emphasise that industry standards require a specific formal register and a mastery of non-verbal cues. According to Krishnan et.al (2022), in a formal interview environment, unsuccessful Malaysian graduates consistently fail to communicate clearly, fail to read professional contextual prompts, and routinely demonstrate an inability to rephrase or elaborate their speeches in an professionally acceptable manner.

The results suggest that youth often encounter difficulty transitioning from classroom-based proficiency to the high-pressure expectations of contemporary professional settings. Recruiters prioritise paralinguistic features such as vocal pacing and tone as well as kinesic markers like eye contact and gestures. The finding that evaluates a candidate's competence from the initial greeting highlights that communicative success in the professional settings is a holistic performance rather than a purely linguistic ability. Ultimately, this research underscores the need for a shift in ESL pedagogy within the Malaysian context. The current gap between youth confidence and industry reality suggests that academic success alone is insufficient for employability. To bridge this mismatch, educational interventions must move beyond theoretical grammatical accuracy and focus on fostering interactional readiness, professional register, and non-verbal professional etiquette. By aligning classroom training with the spontaneous and high-pressure realities of the industry, universities can better equip Malaysian youth to meet the rigorous communicative demands of contemporary industry expectations.

Conclusion

This study investigated the persistent mismatch between the ESL communicative competence of Malaysian youth. The quantitative data indicated that youth possess high levels of self-perceived competence, particularly in strategic ability. The findings suggest that youth often overestimate their professional readiness based on academic or classroom-based performance, whereas recruiters prioritise practical factors such as professional register, non-verbal etiquette, and strategic adaptability. Ultimately, bridging this employability gap requires a fundamental shift in ESL pedagogy to move beyond theoretical accuracy toward fostering authentic interactional readiness, interactional readiness that aligns with contemporary industry standards. The findings of this study offer several implications for academia and the professional sector in Malaysia. Primarily, the research underscores a pedagogical implication for higher education institutions. The current reliance on traditional, classroom-based assessments may be providing youth with a false sense of security regarding their professional

communication skills. Therefore, curriculum designers should consider integrating high-pressure, spontaneous communication simulations and mock interviews that focus on the removal of interactional noise and the mastery of formal sociolinguistic registers. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting the role of non-verbal professional etiquette as a foundational component of communicative competence. By identifying that recruiters judge competence based on paralinguistic and kinesic cues even before verbal interaction begins, the research suggests that ESL frameworks must be broadened to include non-verbal self-regulation. Finally, for the industry, these findings imply a need for more transparent communication regarding recruitment expectations. By explicitly identifying the specific communicative behaviours that define professional reputation, recruiters can help bridge the perceptual gap, ensuring that Malaysian youth are better prepared to meet the rigorous expectations of the global industries. Consequently, there is an urgent need for further studies to investigate specific industry expectations across various corporate sectors in Malaysia. Future empirical research should directly explore recruiter benchmarks and hiring standards to map the precise communication competencies required by employers, thereby providing a more aligned, data-driven framework for future graduate employability initiatives

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involving any parties in this research study.

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