

Incorporation of Employability Skills in English Language Courses: Integrated Course Perspective

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Abstract

Linking English language proficiency and employability skills together is supported by the general agreement in the language literature. Communication skills are highly valued as a graduate attribute for employability. For diagnosing the integration of employability skills in English courses, a survey questionnaire was presented to a panel of EFL instructors and EFL learners and graduates at the College of Sciences and Arts in Uglat Asugour, Qassim University. The results of the survey indicated that EFL students are lacking employability skills. Methodologies of instructors need to be developed to adhere to the integration of employability skills in English language courses. Moreover, it has been found that authentic assessment should replace traditional content assessment.

Keywords: employability skills, language course, integrated course, communicative skills, authentic assessment

1. Introduction

Employability skills refer to those skills a graduate utilizes to get a job and succeed in it. These skills speak about how to use language in communication. They include personal skills that are related to the graduate's academic proficiency and ability of language communication skills, to cope with changing circumstances and to develop one's abilities constantly during work. They also include interpersonal skills that relate to the graduate's ability to communicate with the work team effectively. Contributing to the progress of work needs the ability to express and present one's thoughts confidently, accepting criticism of ideas tolerantly.

English communication skill is one of the most important employability requirements in the labor market. How to cope with the rapid change in the labor market and fierce competition is a key question that is requested to be considered. Unfortunately, a number of EFL graduates may find it a daunting task to speak or write fluently and accurately in English. As persons have different abilities to convert the same resources into meaningful outcomes, it is crucial to consider individual differences while teaching language courses in order to develop not only academic competency but also employability skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1 What Is Employability?

Employability is defined as a person-centered construct that aids in identifying one's personal factors of weakness and strengths (Whelan, et al. 2018). Employability skills include a set of achievement skills, understandings, and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to be successful in their chosen occupations, furthermore, they benefit ourselves, the workplace, the community, and the national economy (Arkoudis et al. 2014). In all majors including the field of education, graduates are expected to master 'life skills' such as teamwork skills, communication skills, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving skills (Dahunsi, 2017).

Other types of psychological skills such as intercultural competence, independent learning, and self-motivation are important for maintaining a stable career and sustainable employability. "Sustainable employability refers to a person's ability to gain or maintain quality work throughout their working life" (Smyth, J., Winona, S., & Hansen, V., 2018). In addition, reinforcing employees' capabilities and valuable contributions to the organization are the core of sustainable employability. Furthermore, flexibility, self-knowledge, and innovation are highly regarded as of great importance to sustainable employability (Casteren, et al. 2021).

How to be successful in your career and maintain sustainable employability is a key question for most undergraduate students as it is assumed that there is a great connection between successful career transition and employability (Vos, et al. 2021). Sustainable employability encompasses skills and experiences that cope with job demands are of vital importance for a person's ability to maintain success and progress in their career (Smyth, Winona, & Hansen, 2018). For long-term employability, Whelan, et al. (2018) assured the importance of career guidance, self-esteem, and self-efficiency as keys to developing one's abilities in a changing labor world.

The main factors that influence sustainable employability are : (Smyth, J., Winona, S., & Hansen, V., 2018).

- Having the motivation to conduct quality work,
- Having the opportunity and the right work context,
- Co-creating value on personal, organizational, and community level, and
- Being able to transfer skills, knowledge, and competencies to another job

CCRS (College & Career Readiness & Success) Center, GTL (Great Teachers & Leaders) Center, and RTI (Research Triangle Institute) (2016) introduce three main categories of employability skills:

a- *Effective Relationships*

These skills include Interpersonal Skills and Personal Qualities.

b- *Workplace Skills*

Which are concerned with Resource Management, Information Use, Communication Skills, Systems Thinking, and Technology use.

c- *Applied Knowledge* that implies Applied Academic Skills and Critical Thinking Skills.

As part of employability skills technological skills are vital to learning and working in the twenty-first century which requires special and high-rated skills such as collaboration, communication, information and communication, technology literacy, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills (Anderson, R & Rustad, M, 2022). As well promoting computational thinking, including critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving, is considered to be a key skill of the 21st century (Lemay, et al., 2021).

2.2 Importance of Employability Skills in Language Learning

Employability is widely cited as a key reason to study a language as employability skills represent a rationale for learning languages that represent a twenty-first-century argument (Canning, 2009). The job market demands that graduates possess employable qualities to demonstrate in job interviews (Clement & Murugavel 2015). They are expected to voice their ideas in English without ambiguity or fear. However, many graduates are unemployable due to their poor communication skills and lack of confidence (Clement & Murugavel 2015). Thus, students need to improve their language skills to feel confident to face job interviews and group discussions through upskilling to meet their ever-changing and demanding careers. This may be achieved through training graduate students to practice work tasks and reinforce their workability and sustainable employability in a changing field of professional work (Herbert, et al. 2020).

Employers tend to demand a higher level of oral than written skills for both the most and second most useful language (Beadle, et al., 2015). The most common method of verification of language skills reported by interviewees is using oral tests, followed by both written and oral tests, certification by third parties, other methodologies, and lastly written tests (Beadle, et al., 2015). Hence, employability skills are essential to obtain an outstanding job and managing it well. Therefore, students need to develop their language communication skills to feel confident through interviews and succeed at work after getting the job. To manage this, students should not only master written skills, but also oral communication skills.

2.3 Integrate Employability Skills in Language Courses

It is important to improve students' awareness of employability skills and the needed experiences to develop these skills besides developing their understanding of their responsibility to improve their English language proficiency regarding both academic and social-communicative abilities to enhance their employability (Arkoudis et al., 2014). In addition, their self-awareness of their academic abilities, self-perception, and personal competencies represent motivational factors in their educational context (Hausen, et al., 2022). These personal competencies that contribute to self-perception and developing students' academic context include reasoning ability, intellectual curiosity, organization, responsibility, and sociability are among (Hausen, et al., 2022).

To develop employability skills, Canning (2016) identifies the following steps:

- Develop relationships with employers
- Maintain contact with past students, some years after graduation who may be now recruiters.
- Share good practices with other departments in the educational institution.
- Develop partnerships with university careers service.
- Remember that enhancing employability is a partnership between students, teaching staff, careers services, and employers.

Pegg, Waldock, Hendy, and Lawton (2012) illustrate the importance of personal development planning tools and career advice to assist students in making connections between their career intentions and their learning, and to develop students' employability skills through co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. This approach connects labor market opportunities, personal development and aspirations, skills development, career management, and learning to support and inform students about the possibilities that await them.

Enhancing employability in classrooms includes the following (Canning, 2016):

- Some higher educational institutes run institution-wide credit-bearing courses that can be taken by any student registered at the institution. Students are sometimes able to do a project relating to part-time work undertaken while studying.
- Career services are an important partner in developing employability, but their resources vary from institution to institution.

- Integrating employability skills into the curriculum.

The importance of assessment cannot be underestimated. However, it is difficult to measure students' employability because there is no employability index to be used as a measure (Arkoudis et al., 2014). The British Council in Delhi (2014) discussed whether the assessment should be specific or generic, and how far language standards can be agnostic of trades and skills. The discussion resulted in recommendations that researchers are required to answer the above question (the British Council, 2014).

Any attempt to evaluate a particular pedagogical approach may be limited because employability development is multi-factorial, context-dependent, and long-term work (Pegg et al., 2012). The approach of self-assessment of employability skills after trying each pedagogical tactic may be an effective method of evaluating one's employability skills (Pegg et al., 2012). Therefore, students should not only master employability skills, but they should also learn how to measure and assess these skills.

- From a comprehensive educational perspective, employability skills can be applied through (Twining et al., 2020):
- Helping every learner to develop as a whole person,
- Developing skills as an application of knowledge,
- Designing a quality curriculum based on planning considering both knowledge and competencies.
- Making decisions is one of the most important values that should be developed.
- Training teachers as a central role in any curriculum's success.

Developing employability skills is not about attempting to change the personality of students, nor attempting to make micro-level changes in individual attitudes and actions. Nevertheless, It reinforces their individuality and personalizes their educational experiences. It may be achieved through making students aware of the world of work and helping them reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and what they might do to enhance their attributes and give them the opportunity to practice the language in the field of work not only in academic courses. This may be achieved through cooperating between institutions, decision-makers, and academics to enhance students' job employability and make them focus on work readiness through applying workplace learning and vocational training or internship programs (Betsy Ng, 2022).

3. Research Questions

Question (1) Are EFL learners aware of the employability skills needed to work labor?

Question (2) Do EFL courses develop employability skills?

Question (3) Are employability skills assessed in the EFL courses?

4. Methodology

To answer the research questions, an electronic questionnaire was designed by the researcher and then sent to 300 EFL instructors and learners in Uglat Asugour College of Sciences and Arts Qassim University. Of the participants who responded to the questionnaire 161 most of whom were females as shown in table (1). After receiving the responses from the participants, the researcher collected the data and analyzed the results of the study.

4.1 Participants and Location Review

The participants of this study were post-graduates and teachers at Qassim University, KSA. Table (1) presents the demographic information of participants.

Table 1. demographic information about participants

Gender	Qualification
Males 30 %	MA & Ph.D. 17 %
Females 70 %	Bachelor 28 %
	Student 55 %

4.2 Employability Survey

The researcher conducted an employability questionnaire (see the appendix) to assess EFL course employability skills. The selected employability skills were divided into three main categories; (1) the participants' awareness of employability skills, (2) the employment skills applied in instruction, and (3) the employment skills assessed in the EFL courses. In order to confirm the suitability and clarity of the survey questions, the survey questions were modified according to the views of EFL specialists. To confirm the ethics of the research, the participants were allowed not to write their names on the questionnaire in order to avoid feeling embarrassed.

The survey questionnaire is divided into three main parts: (1) awareness criterion, (2) language instruction, and (3) language assessment. The awareness criterion part evaluates EFL learners' knowledge about employability skills. The language instruction part reflects language teaching processes, the extent of student participation in authentic activities, and participation in the course development as a part of developing their employability skills. The language assessment part is concerned with real language evaluation procedures that consider assessing employability skills.

In order to submit the survey to a large group of EFL learners and instructors, it was conducted using Google Drive. Eleven

multiple-choice and grading scale items were prepared using Google derive sheets. The researcher sent the website address of the survey to groups of EFL learners post graduates and instructors through e-mails and WhatsApp software. Results were collected and analyzed.

5. Results

The following section offers findings from the data collected using the survey questionnaires.

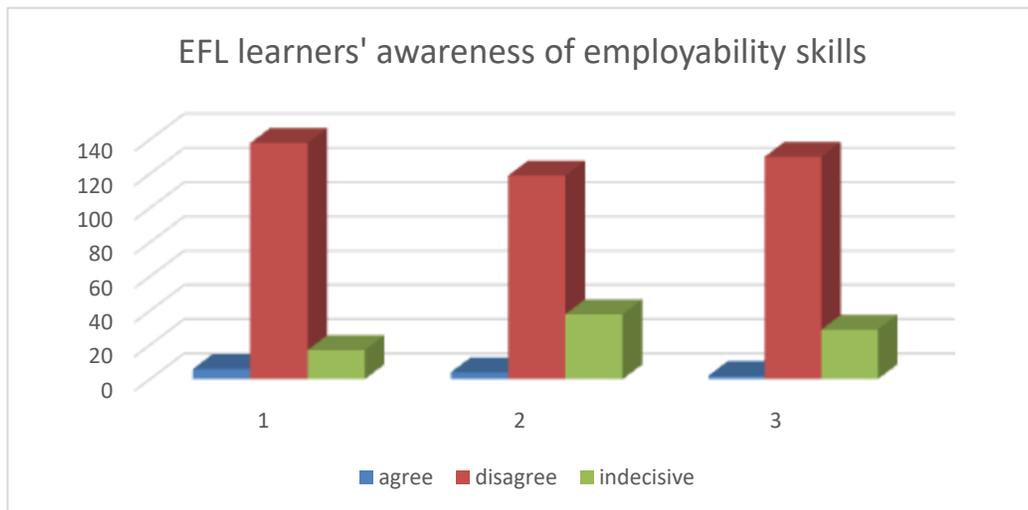
5.1 Questions 1 to 4 Awareness Criterion

Table (2) introduces the participants' responses to the awareness criterion.

Table 2. participants' responses to the awareness criterion

No.	Item	Agree	Disagree	Indecisive
1	EFL learners know the skills and qualities of a graduate required by their college/ department.	6 (3.7%)	138 (85.7%)	17 (10.6%)
2	EFL learners know the labor market demands.	4 (2.5%)	119 (73.9%)	38 (23.6%)
3	English language courses offered in college serve their purpose of increasing employability rates.	2 (1.2%)	130 (80.7%)	29 (18%)

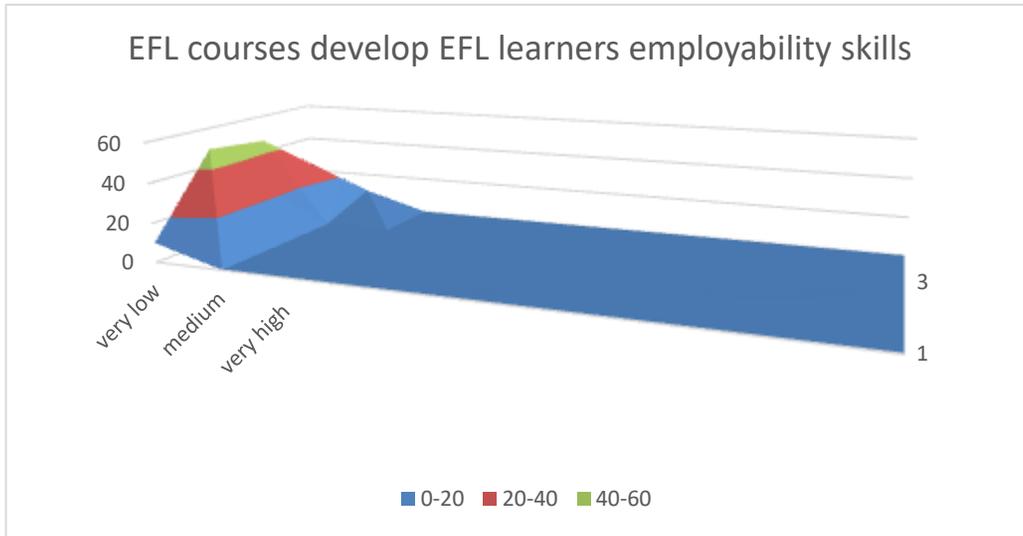
Responses presented in table (2) reveal that 138 (85.7%) out of 161 participants mentioned that EFL learners don't know the skills and qualities of graduates required by their college/department. As for labor market demands; 119 (73.9%) agreed that EFL learners don't know these demands. 130 (80.7%) mentioned that English language courses don't improve employability skills.



Item 4:

To what extent do English courses qualify learners for labor market? (specify a point out of ten):

very low extent: 1	10	6.2%
2	49	30.4%
3	46	28.6%
4	37	23%
5	10	6.2%
6	5	3.1%
7	1	0.6%
8	1	0.6%
9	1	0.6%
very high extent: 10	1	0.6%



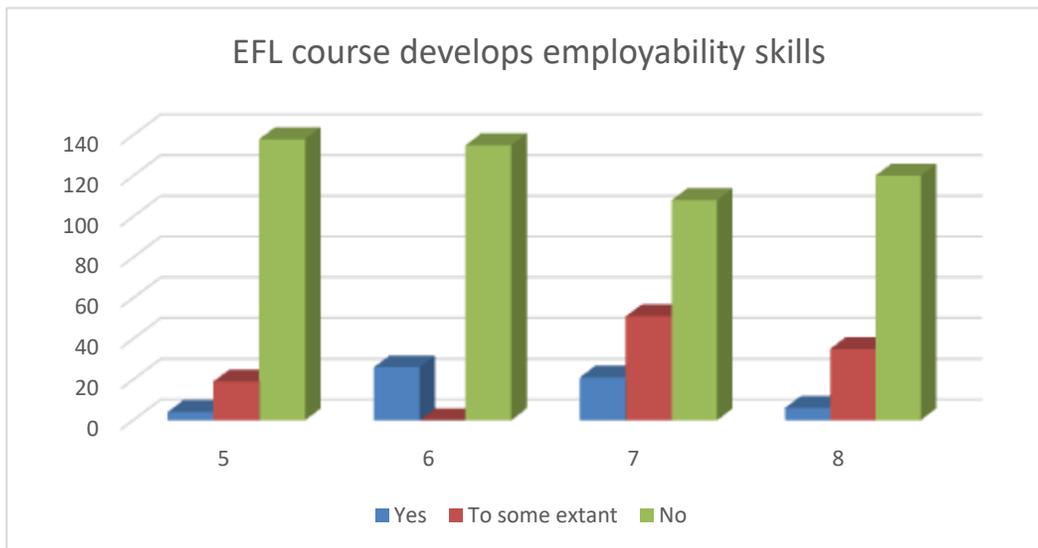
Most participants ticked points 2,3, and 4 (2=49, 3=46, 4=32); this means that EFL courses don't properly qualify learners to the labor market.

5.2 Questions 5- 8 Language Instruction Criterion

Table (3) introduces the participants' responses to Language Instruction Criterion.

Table 3. participants' responses to Language Instruction Criterion

5	Do EFL learners have the opportunity to manage their study and training?	yes 4 2.5%	to some extent 19 11.8%	No 138 85.7%
6	Is EFL learners' training formal or interactive?	formal 135 83.9%	interactive 26 16.1%	
7	To what extent do EFL learners participate in oral communication and presentation?	regularly 2 1.2%	to some extent 51 31.7%	rarely 108 67.1%
8	To what extent do EFL learners work in groups and with teams?	regularly 6 3.7%	to some extent 35 21.1%	rarely 120 74.5%



Close inspection of responses presented in table (3) reveals that:

- 1- EFL learners don't have the opportunity to manage their study and training.
- 2- Training of EFL learners is formal rather interactive.
- 3- EFL learners don't participate in oral communication and presentation.

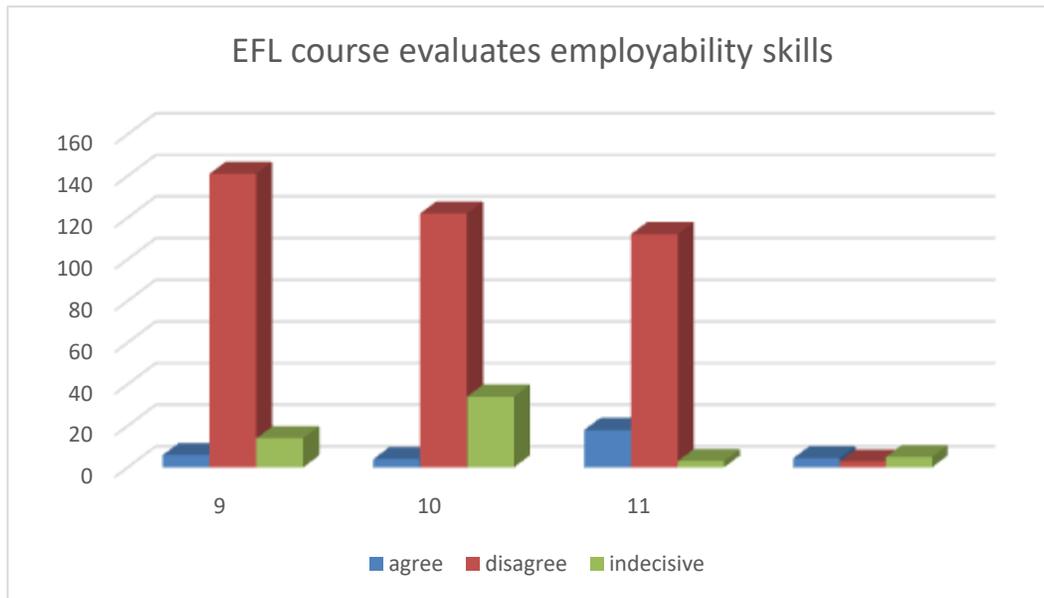
4- EFL learners rarely work in groups and with teams.

5.3 Questions 9-11 Language Assessment Criterion

Table (4) introduces the participants' responses to the language Assessment Criterion.

Table 4. participants' responses to language Assessment Criterion

No.	Item	Agree	Disagree	Indecisive
9	EFL learners' evaluation system includes listening and oral proficiency.	6 (3.7%)	141 (87.6%)	14 (8.7%)
10	EFL learners participate in evaluating the course regarding developing transferable and employability skills.	4 (2.5%)	122 (76.3%)	34(21.3%)
11	Due to authentic evaluation methods, EFL learners understand the weaknesses and strengths of their presentation and group discussion skills.	18 (11.3%)	112 (70%)	30 (18.3%)



Responses related to language assessment revealed that EFL learners' evaluation system doesn't include listening and oral proficiency. 122 participants mentioned that EFL learners don't participate in evaluating their courses. Furthermore, evaluation system doesn't include authentic evaluation activities.

6. Discussion of the Results

The previous data indicate that EFL course does not provide the adequate development of the EFL learners' awareness of employability skills. They are not aware of their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, they are not aware of the requirements needed by labor market in which they are supposed to work after graduation. The data also indicate that EFL courses do not prepare the EFL learners to develop their employability skills including their communication skills, teamwork, or training them for the labor market. or allow them to share in the process of evaluation. The results are based on the EFL learners' responses considering their own perception of the employability skills as they were simplified by the researcher in the questionnaire to collect the needed data. Although the learners may be well qualified academically, they lack developing their employability skills such as communicative skills, teamwork, self-aware of weaknesses and strengths, and interacting with others skillfully. In addition, the learners may be lectured about the importance of academic courses in their future work, but they lack the practice of developing their employability skills and their language performance. This leads to being knowledgeable and competent academically through learning their English courses, but they are less qualified in their language performance regarding communication and interaction skills. To overcome these defects, EFL courses should focus more on practicing communication and developing the learners' skills other than focusing only on their knowledge competence.

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Appendix
Survey Questionnaire

* Required

Name

[Empty text box for Name]

Qualification *

[Empty text box for Qualification]

Note

Please press submit by the end of the questionnaire. Thanks for cooperation

Awareness criterion

EFL learners know the skills and qualities of a graduate required by their college/ department.

- agree
indecisive
disagree

EFL learners know the labor market demands.

- agree
indecisive
disagree

English language courses offered in college serve their purpose in increasing employability rates.

- agree
indecisive
disagree

To what extent do English courses qualify the learners to labor market? (specify a point out of ten)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
very low extent [radio buttons] very high extent

Language Instruction Criterion

Do EFL learners have the opportunity to manage their study and training?

- yes
- to some extent
- no

Is EFL learners' training formal or interactive?

- formal
- interactive

To what extent do EFL learners participate in oral communication and presentation?

- regularly
- to some extent
- rarely

To what extent do EFL learners work in groups and with teams?

- regularly
- to some extent
- rarely

Language Assessment Criterion

EFL learners' evaluation system includes listening and oral proficiency.

- agree
- indecisive
- disagree

EFL learners participate in evaluating the course regarding developing transferable and employability skills.

- agree
- indecisive
- disagree

Due to authentic evaluation methods, EFL learners understand weaknesses and strengths of their presentation and group discussion skills.

- agree
- indecisive
- disagree

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