LLT Journal, e-ISSN 2579-9533, p-ISSN 1410-7201, Vol. 25, No. 2, October 2022, pp. 474-483

LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching
http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/LLT
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

INVESTIGATING EMPLOYABILITY SKILL GAPS AMONG ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS IN ALGERIA

Ahmed Mehdaoui
Ibn Khaldoun University, Algeria
correspondence: academictiaret@gmail.com
https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.v25i2.4912
received 18 July 2022; accepted 30 September 2022

Abstract
As English plays an increasingly important role in today's job market, several studies have shown a direct correlation between English and employability. In Algeria, many Algerians believe that good English skills can help them get better jobs. However, in today's 21st century, as studies have proven, college graduates are more employable if they have skills that meet the demands of the modern workplace. The question that arises from this study is whether Algerian students majoring in English have the skills that will enable them to pursue successful careers. As far as we know, few studies address skill gaps among Algerian major students. Therefore, this study aims to examine the discrepancies between the skills that Algerian English major students are taught in comparison to the set of skills required for employment. To address this, this work applied a quantitative approach using a questionnaire administered to 40 undergraduate students from the Department of English at Ibn Khalodun University in Tiaret, Algeria. Key findings of this research revealed a gap in teamwork and research analysis skills, which are top-notch competencies for employers.

Keywords: Algeria, employability skills, English major, skill gaps

Introduction
Given today's competitive labor market and 21st-century employment demands, the skills needed in the modern workplace have changed in most industries. University graduates applying for all types of 21st-century jobs must possess certain skills, such as communication skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, and the ability to interact with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds if they are to increase their chances of landing a rewarding job. These skills are referred to as "employment skills" that are most valued and sought after by today's employers.

Among these skills, English is regarded as one of the abilities that students should develop the most. This is so because the majority of modern international commercial transactions call for English.

Even in nations where English is not an official language, many employers believe that English is crucial for jobs, according to English at Work (2016). Thus, English provides people with a variety of opportunities in nations where it is not their first language.

In Algeria, for instance, the majority of Algerians place a high value on English and believe that having proficient English will help them land jobs in important positions with multinational corporations. Improved employability, according to the Algerian government, may be best attained through the vigorous implementation of English education in the country (Euromonitor, 2012).

Because they are aware that a degree in English Studies is a flexible field of study that does not directly relate to particular vocations, many Algerian students prefer to pursue this degree. Unlike some university majors, like engineering, which lead to employment in engineering only, graduates of the English major succeed in a variety of business professions, including teaching, librarianship, management, sales, and marketing, and other fields where business materials often use advanced and technical English.

Since many Algerian students tend to believe that majoring in English will help them find employment after graduation, it is critical to know whether the skills that Algerian students the English major receive qualify them to succeed in these common professions. According to Di Paolo & Tansel (2015), English teaching and learning is "likely to be successful if the knowledge and skills that students learn reflect the demands of employment in local industries." Seen in this way, English major students who are armed with the employability skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity, problem-solving, and information analysis are well prepared enough to thrive in today's world economy knowledge.

In light of such, our study asks, do the Algerian English major students have the skills that qualify them to pursue successful future careers? Studies investigating skill gaps among university students in some countries help them make efforts to bridge the gap between society, economy, and education. In the Algerian context, similar studies addressing the gap among Algerian English students are scarce.

Thus, the goal of this research is to investigate the Algerian English major students' perceptions of the importance of employability skills. Examining their perceptions of the employability skills and their satisfaction with them will help identify the gaps between the skills they are taught in comparison to the set of skills required for employment.

To achieve this aim, the undergraduate English major at Ibn Khaldoun University is used as a case study in this study, and the following questions serve as its guiding principles:

1. What is the perception of English major students at Ibn Khaldoun University of the skills that employers seek from graduates?
2. What are the most important employability skills that are lacking in them?

Finally, this study aims to provide background information to help English major students and EFL teachers understand the value of employability skills in the English classroom.

Employability Skills: Meaning and Importance

Employability skills is a term used interchangeably with several related terms such as soft skills, generic skills, 21st -century skills, non-technical skills, competencies, transversal skills, and career skills (Silva, 2009; Economou, 2016; Burns, 2017; Ruuskanen, et al. 2018; Joynes et al., 2019, among others). According to the Employability skills for the future (DEST, 2002, p. 1), many terms are used in different environments to describe general skills that all employees may have.

The Allen Consulting Group report (2006, p. 11) refers to the terminology used across sectors, industries, and countries as follows:

They are also known by several other names, including key skills, core skills, life skills, essential skills, key competencies, necessary skills, and transferable skills. However, the industry's preferred term is employability skills.

Although these terms may take on different meanings in different contexts, they have all evolved based on or incorporating business and industry needs and refer to individual skills and abilities that are valued in the labor market (Pritchard, 2013). That is, as individual job performance is measured in terms of skills and abilities, employability is established as the following:

The skills, knowledge, and competencies that enhance a worker's ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work and cope with change, secure another job if he/she so wishes, or has been laid off and enter more easily into the labor market at different periods of the lifecycle (International Labor Organization, ILO, in Brewer, 2013: 6).

Concerning the skill sets that are needed in the workplace, numerous guidelines and taxonomies have been produced to describe what the skills are. As far as humanities sciences are concerned, including English major, the 2017 British Academy report cited the following as "The right skills in the arts, humanities, and social sciences": 1) communication (communicating effectively), 2) collaboration (working with others to achieve common goals), 3) research and analysis (doing research and analyzing information and data using technology where appropriate, and taking decisions), and 4) attitudes and behaviors (including problem-solving and creativity). These skills, deemed crucial to humanities and science graduates for future UK workforce, closely match those identified by ILO , written by Brewer (2013, p. p, 10-11): 1) learning to learn (think, organize, process, and maintain information, interpret and communicate information, manage own learning, etc.), 2) communication (competent in reading, write to the needs of an audience, write effectively in the languages in which the business is conducted, listen and communicate effectively, read, articulate own ideas and vision, comprehend and use materials, including graphs, charts, displays, etc.), 3) teamwork (interact with co-workers, work within the culture of the group, plan and make decisions with others and support the outcomes, work in teams or groups, respect the thoughts and opinions of others in the group, lead when appropriate and effectively, lead when appropriate, give and accept feedback, etc.), and 4) problem solving (think creatively, identify and solve problems, adapt to new circumstances, suggest new ideas to get the job done, etc.).

As can be seen, the list of skills needed by job seekers is long. However, due to the nature of each business, sector, and job, not all these skills are required for every job. Nevertheless, as Ruiters (2013) notes, because workplaces are generally highly collaborative, teamwork and communication skills are essential. Similarly, The Council of Industry and Higher Education (2008) points out that most employers consider both communication and teamwork skills as the core of any business. The reason for this is that effective collaboration generally requires effective communication between team members. For example, when team members demonstrate excellent communication, they will be able to collaborate successfully. Interestingly, this is an area where English major graduates can excel. Therefore, when English major graduates communicate effectively, they will gain

extra competitive advantages over those who have only traditional skills. Rees et al., (2007, p. 12) demonstrate this point by stating that "English graduates are highly employable when they can combine the benefits of their academic study with skills both common to other subjects and distinctive to English."

So far, these skills are not investigated among English major students. Nevertheless, many surveys present the value of English in many workplaces like business, tourism, oil industry, management, sales, and marketing as well as other fields (Economist, 2012; English at Work, 2016)). Similar studies found that proficiency in English provides a better opportunity for individuals to get stable and better jobs (Dustmann & Fabbr, 2003; Lowden et al., 2011) found that English is highly rewarding for its users in the workplace. This is because English provides a particular context for developing employability skills. A business expert, Steve Strauss, confirms this point as follows:

I run a small business and the people I hire do various tasks -- SEO, project management, social media, and so forth. For my money (literally and figuratively), for my needs, and I suggest the needs of smallest businesses, English majors are easily the top choice when it comes to getting the type of teammate who can make us all better, as they say in basketball. Why, because they're smart, critical thinkers, bold, good writers, and easy to work with (The Huff Post, 5/ 23/13, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hiring-english majors_b_3484409/amp).

Career Path for English Majors (2013, p. 33) added that English majors possess "a unique set of talents that can be applied to corporate positions, which emphasize critical thinking, personal relations, problem-solving, and excellent written and oral communication skills." The reason is that an English major is a versatile academic discipline that is shared with other modules as part of combined or joint programs like literature, literary theory, creative writing, culture studies, communication, and others, which can be applied in various fields like journalism, entertainment, tourism, marketing, etc.

With this in mind, the skills that an English major study can offer are similar to those cited previously by ILO (2013) in the core skills for youth employability and the British Academy (2017) in the right skills for arts, humanities, and social science. This includes 1) oral and written communication, 2) problem-solving, 3) teamwork and collaboration, and 4) research and analyzing information and data using technology where appropriate. Operated properly, this combination of skills is a site where English major students can underpin successful participation in job performance and life.

In a nutshell, this section provides an overview of the importance of employability skills and, by extension, to English major students. The following section sets out the methodology used in the study whilst establishing the link between the skills employers need and the skills English major students feel are important to gain.

Method

Participants and Data Collection

To find the relationship between the skills employers seek and the skills that the students majoring in English gain at the university, 40 English major undergraduate students from the English department at the Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret took part in the study.

Concerning the research purpose, questionnaires were used. The questionnaire was designed for the students to know their attitudes toward the learned English skills about their future careers.

Regarding the design form, the measurement scale used in the questionnaire is a Likert-style 5-point scale. In the first part, the students intended to check the students' awareness of their employability skills using a five-point Likert scale (1- very important, 2- important, 3 less important, 4- unimportant, 5- neutral). The second part concerns the respondents' satisfaction with the knowledge and skills they receive in the university using a five-point Likert scale (1- strongly agree, 2- agree, 3 strongly disagree, 4- disagree, 5- neutral).

Some studies showed a lower response rate when using an online questionnaire; therefore, to avoid such the questionnaire was administered to the respondent class.

Findings and discussions

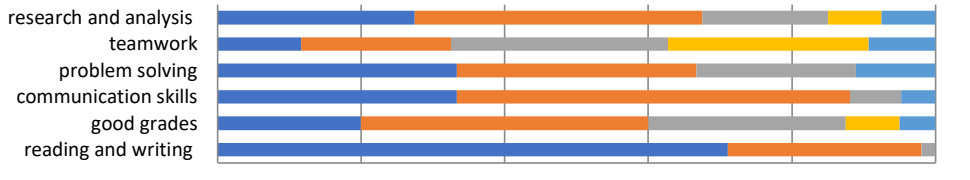
Presentation of the Results

Students' Perception of the English major Career Outlook

In an open-ended question, students were asked to state their opinions about the job opportunities offered by the English major degree. Almost most students cited a teaching career as the most available option offered by their degrees. Few students mentioned translation as another option, though translation is not part of their field of study. Very few concluded that their English degree would help them work in the tourism sector. Because of their lack of awareness of the job opportunities offered by their English major degree, it can be said that they may lose many job opportunities.

Students' Perception of the Skills Sought by Employers

Students were asked to indicate the skills and capabilities they considered important for employers when recruiting graduates. Table 2 below captures the top skills that students considered important for employers when recruiting graduates.



	reading and writing	good grades	communication skills	problem solving	teamwork	research and analysis
very important	72.5	20	35	22.5	12.5	27.5
important	27.5	40	57.5	22.5	22.5	40
less important	2	27.5	7.5	15	32.5	17.5
not important		7.5			30	7.5
neutral		5	5	7.5	10	7.5

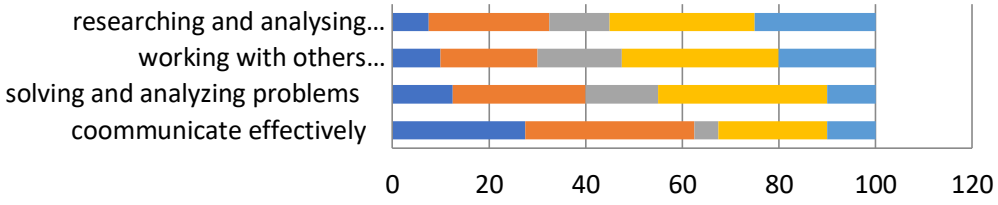
Figure 1. Students' perception of the skills sought by employers

When students were asked to consider which skills are important to employers, the majority consider good grades in exams and having good skills in reading, writing, and speaking more important for employers (72,5% and 27,5% rate reading and speaking as very important and important), and 60% view good grades as important for employers. The most important employability skill sought by employers, according to the respondents, is communication skills (35% very important and 57, 5% important, which makes 95, 5% in total). The second employability skill students perceive important for employers when recruiting graduates is problem-solving (22, 5% rate it as very important and 72, 5% rate it as important, making 95% in total). Skills like analyzing information, and data and making decisions are also considered important for employers (27, 5% rate very important and 40 rates important = 67, 5%). The last skill sought by employers, according to the students, is teamwork skills.

The results confirm that students still consider some areas of academic skills more important than the non-academic ones. This should be unsurprising; however, since the assessment of foreign language students' competence has always been related to their ability to read, write and speak well.

Skills and Satisfaction

Table 4 below captures students' satisfaction with the skills development, using a 5-point scale: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. My training develops my ability to:



	coommunicate effectively	solving and analyzing problems	working with others successfully as a team member	researching and analysing information and data, and using technology
Strongly agree	27.5	12.5	10	7.5
agree	35	27.5	20	25
strongly disagree	5	15	17.5	12.5
disagree	22.5	35	32.5	30
neutral	10	10	20	25

Figure 2. Students' perception of the skills they possess

To assess students' level of employability skills development, they were asked to rate the level of their satisfaction. As graph 2 shows, the 2 top skills were: communication and problem-solving. The least skills that students believe they did not develop during their studies were teamwork and research and data analysis. This

means that students think that they do not possess adequate competence in teamwork and research analysis skills. This result is compatible with the data in graph 2 when students rated teamwork as the least important skill sought by employers.

Discussion

Analyzing the Skill Gaps

After reviewing and analyzing the data, it can be noticed that there is a correlation between students' perception of the most important skills sought by employers (figure 1) and the level of these skills they believe they developed during their English studies (figure 2).

In terms of skills sought by employers when recruiting graduates (shown in graph 1), students think that good grades and integrated skills like reading, grammar, and writing would be the most important for employers. Because businesses in Algeria are still carried in French, this should not be surprising. As teaching is the only the most available career on offer after graduation, as students responded to question 1, English major students in Algeria work hard to obtain good gaining on modules on expense on gaining life skills and knowledge. Admittedly, good grades are still necessary; however, they are not enough to secure a job (Koc & Koncz, 2009). The Adecco Group (2020) stressed this point by saying that employability skills should be prioritized over academic ones.

The second highest important skills for employers, according to the students, are communication and problem solving. The most important skill for employers is teamwork, while students placed it on the lowest rank along with research analysis. Interestingly, this perception does not appear to be confined to employers who regard teamwork skills as a top priority.

In terms of students' satisfaction with the employability skills, they feel they developed during their training, communication, and problem-solving ranked the top skills. The reason is that the English language embraces diverse modes of communication, oral, written, and mixed. Besides, since communication is the benchmark that signals any English learner's competence, students probably often work profusely toward enhancing their communication skills.

The skill gap remains in teamwork and research analysis. Students not only perceive teamwork to be of higher importance for employers, but they also feel that they do not possess its competence. This; whereas, mismatches the business needs. As the workplace environment is highly cooperative, employers expect employees to work with others effectively (Ruiters, 2013). Analyzing information and data, which involves gathering, analyzing, evaluating, and presenting information using technology where appropriate, is also ranked at a low position of students' gain. This is puzzling; however, especially if we consider that, in modern times, most research and media interactions are written and communicated in English, in which English finds diverse opportunities to conduct studies, find information, complete tasks, and communicate findings.

Finally, it seems too early to conclude that our research found that the main skill gaps among English major graduates, participating in this study exist in terms of teamwork and research analysis skills. Why? It can be observed that communication makes up the top skill that students claim to gain during their training. However, communication essentially overlaps with other skills. For

instance, as Brewer (2013) notes, functioning effectively in teamwork needs good communication. When team members demonstrate excellent communication, they will be able to collaborate successfully; however, if they do not, they will face difficulties in working together. Additionally, if there is a backbone to the development of problem-solving, it is most certainly communication. Due to the individuals' differences of ideas in the workplace, conflicts may arise in any team environment. The lack of communication may only create tensions among the team; knowing how to communicate when such a conflict arises; nevertheless, can encourage the team to work through the problem.

This leads us to think about how students consider communication skills. There is a problem with how communication is understood. This problem is found in a study by Cukier (2003) about skill shortage in Canada, which found differences between employers' and students' perceptions of understanding communication skills. According to this study, while 90% of the students assessed their communication skills as excellent, only 30% of employers agreed. This is because students tend to associate communication with their ability to speak fluently and write essays; however, employers associate communication with employees' ability to communicate effectively; i.e., conveying information clearly and accurately, expressing agreement, disagreement, and opinion, talking and sharing their ideas and suggesting solutions to problems and so on.

Therefore, further research on differences in employers' and students in perceptions of how skills understood are needed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present topic of employability skills among English major students investigates the relationship between the outputs of English skills delivered to the English major students in Algeria Vis a Vis to the skills required in the current labor market.

Based on the findings gathered from the participants at the department of English at Ibn Khaldoun University, this research detected a skills gap in teamwork and research and analysis, though critically not decisive for the reason of students' and employers' differences in perceptions of how skills are understood. Yet, the skills gap among graduates has been found in various studies.

Therefore, as a general recommendation, the EFL curricula should ensure to close any skill gap to equip graduates with the necessary job skills to increase their opportunities for 21st -century jobs. Ignoring part of these skills could create great gaps and limitations in recent graduates who aspire to get a job and compete in an increasingly complex world. To achieve this, teachers must take action to shorten the skills gap. This can be achieved through the implementation of different teaching approaches, such as project-based learning, group discussion, self-discovery, online learning, etc.

Finally, our research does not assert to be conclusive findings. Future research is called forth to test the problem of mismatch between the English output and the labor market demands in other Algerian universities. Other studies on employers' and students' differences in perceptions of how skills are understood are also needed.

References

Academy, B. (2017). *The right skills: Celebrating skills in the arts, humanities and social sciences.* London: British Academy.

Brewer, L. (2013). *Enhancing youth employability: What? Why? And How? Guide to core work skills.* Geneva: International Labor Office (ILO).

British Council. (2016). *English and soft skills in the Maghreb.* London: Spring Gardens. Available at https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/.../english-soft-skills-maghreb-research-report.pdf

Burns, E. (2017). Giving students respect: One of the great soft skills of teaching and learning. *Issues and Ideas in Education, 6*(1), 41–6.

Career Paths for English Majors. (2013). Retrieved from https://english.csuci.edu/documents/english-career-guide.pdf.

Cukier, W. (2003). Constructing the IT skills shortage in Canada: The implications of institutional discourse and practices for the participation of women. *Presentation to the Proceedings of the (2003) SIGMIS Conference on Computer Personnel Research.*

Di Paolo, A., & Tansel, A. (2015). Returns to foreign language skills in a developing country: The case of Turkey. *The Journal of Development Studies, 51*(4), 407- 421.

Dustmann, C., & Fabbr, F. (2003). Language proficiency and labour market performance of immigrants in the UK. *The Economic Journal, 113* (489), 695-717.

Economist Intelligence Unit. (2012). Competing across borders: How cultural and communication barriers affect business. Retrieved from www.eiuperspectives.economist.com/economic-development/competing-across-borders

Economou, A. (2016). Research report on transversal skills frameworks. ATS2020 - Assessment of Transversal Skills 2020. Retrieved from www.ats2020.eu

English at work: Global analysis of language skills in the workplace. (2016). Retrieved from http://englishatwork.cambridgeenglish.org/

Euromonitor International. (2012). *The benefits of the English language for individuals and societies: Quantitative indicators from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen*. British Council Publishing.

Group, A. (2020). Employability, not only employment VET, apprenticeships, and the urgent need to bridge the skills gap in a post-Covid world. Retrieved from https://www.adecco-jobs.com/-/media/project/adeccogroup/pdf-files/tag-vet-whitepaper-2020.pdf/?modified=20210422092443

Group, A. C. (2004). *Employability skills.* Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

Joynes, C., Rossignoli, S., & FenyiwaAmonoo-Kuofi, E. (2019). *21st century skills: Evidence of issues in definition, demand and delivery for development contexts (K4D Helpdesk Report).* Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

Koc, E. & Koncz, A. (2009). *Job outlook 2010.* Bethlehem, PA: National Association of Colleges and Employers.

Lowden, K., Hall, S., Elliot, D., & Lewin, J. (2011). *Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates.* London: Edge Foundation

Pritchard, J. (2013). *The importance of soft skills in entry-level employment and post-secondary success: Perspectives from employers and community colleges.* Seattle: Seattle Jobs Initiative.

Rees, C., Forbes, P., and Kubler, B. (2007). *Student employability profiles: A guide for higher education practitioners.* York: The Higher Education Academy.

Ruiters, A. (2013). *Proficiency enhancement in the workplace through informal learning. University of Western Cape*. Master Baccalaureus Commercii in Industrial Psychology.

Ruuskanen, T., Vehkamäki, H., Riuttanen, L. & Lauri, A. (2018). An exploratory study of the learning of transferable skills in a research-oriented intensive course in atmospheric sciences. *Sustainability, 10*(5), 1385. https://doi.org/10.3390/su10051385

Silva, E. (2009). Measuring skills for 21st-century learning. *Phi Delta Kappa*, *90*(9), 630-634.

Strauss, S. (2013, May 5) Why I hire English hajors. *The HuffPost*. Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hiring-english majors_b_3484409/amp.

The Council of Industry and Higher Education. (2008). *Graduates employability*. London: The Council of Industry and Higher Education.