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# BRIDGING THE SCHISM: A NEED ANALYSIS FOR A TERTIARY AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS MODULE


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### Abstract:

The integration of university and career-specific skills development has become a focus in curriculum design, particularly in response to the demands of contemporary tertiary challenges and a globalized and skill-driven workforce. As such, a tailored curriculum requires a needs analysis to ensure that the course materials meet tertiary and industry expectations, and consequently, to ascertain students' successful professional futures. Hence, a needs analysis was conducted to identify the skills required by SPM school leavers before embarking on a university education path or a career journey after tertiary education. However, this study focuses only on a portion of a larger needs analysis: the educators' perceptions of the types of skills particularly English language skills that students require in their studies and in the workplace. Three teachers and three lecturers were interviewed. The findings highlighted five main structures that need to be integrated in the material development process: reading and writing, speaking and listening, grammar and vocabulary, technology and digital literacy and assessment and engagement. The study offers implications for module developers seeking to design comprehensive modules that polish the skills essential for success in tertiary education and future employment.

### Keyword:

Employability, ESP, Need Analysis, SPM, Tertiary



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## Introduction

The integration of university and career-specific skills development has become an essential focus in curriculum design, particularly in response to the demands of a globalized and skill-driven workforce. Many researchers have demonstrated the value of aligning academic instruction with university skills and career-oriented competencies to prepare students for their tertiary and professional futures (Montoya Reyes, 2024; Dewi et al, 2023; Trung et al. 2022; Ionitiu, 2024). The necessity for tailored educational experiences highlights the importance of needs analysis in the design of such courses particularly English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses (Mohamed, Aljadaan & Al-Ani, 2024). A comprehensive needs analysis is critical in ensuring the course materials effectively align with tertiary and industry expectations and students' professional futures (Faiza, 2010 and Cress & Thomas, 2020). In a needs analysis process, course developers should understand the language learners' needs, wants, and lacks to develop an effective syllabus that prepares them for the tertiary and professional skills demands they will encounter (Tomak & Ataş, 2019). They also should employ needs analysis to further comprehend how environmental situations such as professional information (Liu, Doss & Shi, 2025), personal information (Liu & Modehiran, 2026), language information (Rosininghe, 2024), learner's lack and learner's need (Munir et al., 2025) play a major role in fostering the skills that language learners required to succeed in their studies and respective fields.

Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia or (SPM) Malaysian Certificate of Education is a national examination taken by fifth-form secondary school students in Malaysia, usually at 17 years old, and serves as an entry qualification for tertiary education. Generally, SPM school leavers have roughly three months waiting for the results after taking the examination. They usually fill their time by working a part-time job, doing things they enjoy, stay home and relax etcetera (Aisya, 2026). Hence, attending a preparatory course during the time gap will help them with future endeavors. Thus, the objectives of the need analysis are to identify English language skills required by SPM leavers to excel in academic and employment and to determine suitable contents to be included in the preparatory course module.

## Literature Review

Students encounter a significant shift in English expectations when entering university. Secondary school English is often criticised for being too exam-focused and insufficient for professional use, as students rarely see how these skills apply to real-world tasks (Ishak et al., 2025; Otermans et al., 2025). While secondary education emphasises general and academic language acquisition, tertiary programs require English academic writing and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to target the requirements of specialised fields (Dewi et al., 2023). This transition forces students to move beyond basic grammar toward communicative competence within specific professional communities. Consequently, structured preparatory interventions are essential to bridge this critical proficiency gap.

Successful transitions require structured interventions and industry collaboration. One effective approach is by employing the needs analysis framework by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), which enables educators to identify the authentic workplace tasks, learner deficiencies, and contextual demands that foster the skills language learners require to succeed in their tertiary studies and respective fields. The framework consists of five interrelated elements: professional information ( learner's career background and goals) personal information (learner' personal backgrounds and motivations), language information (the specific linguistic features required), learner's lacks (the gap between current and target proficiency), and learner's needs (what must be learned to close that gap). Prior research demonstrates that engaging employers, alumni, and educators yields empirical data that aligns curricula with real industry standards (Ishak et al., 2025; Dewi et al., 2023; Lisá et al., 2019). Failing to conduct this process rigorously often results in educational materials that are misaligned with students' actual professional needs.

Current literature identifies five core competency clusters for academic and professional success: speaking fluency, academic and professional writing, comprehension, foundational grammar, and digital literacy (Azmar & Razali, 2024; Dewi et al., 2023; Ionițiu, 2024; Ishak et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025). In Malaysia, these skills are vital as English proficiency dictates entry into multinational sectors, higher starting salaries, and career mobility (Ali et al., 2021; Azam et al., 2023; Ishak et al., 2025). As local employers prioritise candidates with strong presentation, negotiation, and cross-cultural communication skills, Malaysian graduates frequently face unemployment due to insufficient communicative readiness (Ishak et al., 2025). Teoh et al., (2023) found that many Malaysian graduates are found to have a mismatch between their skills and industry expectations, with the most significant deficiencies identified being English communication, critical, creative, and analytical abilities.

There is a significant gap between the theoretical knowledge taught in academic settings and the practical skills required by industry (Robertson-Cock, 2026; Ganesh et al., 2025). The literature has established persistent and consequential misalignment between the English language skills cultivated in Malaysian secondary and tertiary classrooms and those demanded by professional workplaces. Hence, a targeted preparatory module is strategically essential for SPM leavers to bridge the gap between secondary education and professional expectations as core employability attributes like problem-solving and adaptability intersect with language competence (Otermans et al., 2025; Srivastava, 2026).

## Methodology

The methodology employed in the study is a qualitative research design. Purposive sampling was utilized in selecting the subjects of the study. According to Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024), it is best to obtain data for the study from participants' knowledge and experience. Therefore, the academics in the study were selected for their familiarity with the transitional challenges experienced by SPM leavers and their expertise in pedagogical approaches to teaching English. Research instruments, such as interviews and narrative responses, were used to gauge the academics' perception of the university and career-specific skills required while learning the English language. They were contacted via email and WhatsApp to seek approval to participate in the study. Once consent forms were received, interview appointments were arranged with the participants. However, some participants preferred to provide narrative responses to the interview due to conflicting schedules. The process commenced in July 2025 and ended in August of the same year.

The participants included three (3) secondary school teachers and three (3) English lecturers. Two (2) of the teachers were counsellors, and one (1) was an SPM English book author. Meanwhile, the lecturers were English lecturers from public and private tertiary institutions. The teachers were labelled T1, T2, and T3, and the lecturers were labelled L1, L2, and L3. Its purpose was for easy identification of responses from interview manuscripts and narrative responses. A structured, open-ended questionnaire containing 17 questions was distributed to the participants. As shown in Table 1, the questionnaire items were constructed according to five thematic categories: general, reading and writing, speaking and listening, grammar and vocabulary, and technology and digital literacy. Each theme corresponds to relevant skills required to function effectively at the tertiary level and workplace, ensuring comprehensive inclusion of the construct under investigation.

**Table 1: Summary of Themes**

Section	Theme	Item
A	General	A1-A4
B	Reading and Writing Components	B1-B4
C	Speaking and Listening Components	C1-C4
D	Grammar and Vocabulary	D1-D3
E	Technology and Digital Literacy	E1-E2
<b>Total</b>		<b>17</b>

Meanwhile, Table 2 lists the questions in each category.

**Table 2: Interview Questions**

Section	Theme	Item	Question
A	General	A1	What are the key language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing) that should be prioritized for SPM leavers?
		A2	Should the module focus more on academic English or workplace communication?
		A3	How can we balance grammar fundamentals with practical communication skills?
		A4	What real-life situations (e.g., job interviews, college applications) should the module prepare students for?
B	Reading and Writing Components	B1	What types of texts (emails, reports, essays, summaries) should be included for writing practice?
		B2	Should we include formal vs. informal writing exercises (e.g., emails vs. social media posts)?
		B3	How can we improve students' reading comprehension for both short and long texts?
		B4	Should the module include critical reading (e.g., analyzing news articles, advertisements)?
C	Speaking and Listening Components	C1	What speaking activities (role-plays, presentations, debates) would be most useful for SPM leavers?
		C2	How can we help students improve their pronunciation and fluency?

		C3	Should we include listening exercises with different accents (British, American, Malaysian English)?
		C4	What workplace scenarios (e.g., phone calls, meetings) should be part of listening practice?
D	Grammar and Vocabulary	D1	Which grammar topics (tenses, subject-verb agreement, prepositions) need reinforcement post-SPM?
		D2	How can we make vocabulary learning more practical (e.g., workplace jargon, academic terms)?
		D3	Should we include idioms and phrasal verbs commonly used in professional settings?
E	Technology and Digital Literacy	E1	Should the module incorporate digital communication skills (e.g., writing professional emails, online etiquette)?
		E2	Would AI tools (e.g., grammar checkers, language apps) be useful in this module?
		E3	Should the module incorporate digital communication skills (e.g., writing professional emails, online etiquette)?

## Findings

First, the main findings of the study highlighted that speaking skills emerge as the highest priority for embedding language skills in the preparatory module for SPM leavers, as asserted by the participants. Table 2 further tabulates the academics' preferred skills to be embedded in the designed activities. L1 mentioned that "out of the four English language skills, speaking and writing should be focused more because these two skills are utilized the most and need to be polished" and this is supported by all participants. L2 confirmed the notion by saying that "All 4 skills are important as language works as an integrated system. However, I would prioritise speaking and writing for SPM leavers." and L3 preferred "speaking and reading". Meanwhile, T1, T2 and T3 stated that "speaking is the most challenging for students", "the module should focus on speaking as it is use more at work and in university" and "speaking practice is what our students lack of, so focus on speaking more" respectively. The second preferred skill is writing as unanimously agreed by L1, L2, T1 and T2. Nevertheless, reading and listening were least emphasis except by L3 and T3. This shows that an effective instructional module for SPM leavers should focus on honing predominantly speaking skill, supplemented by writing component and to a minor degree reading and listening activities for balance and strategic integration.

**Table 2: Summary of Preferred Skills**

Participant	Speaking	Writing	Reading	Listening
L1	/	/		
L2	/	/		
L3	/		/	
T1	/	/		
T2	/	/		
T3	/			/

Next, the findings underscore the significance of embedding grammar, vocabulary, technology, and digital literacy in the activities. As can be observed from the responses, all participants supported the integration as to enhance SPM leavers' linguistic foundation and digital competencies for contextual precision and digital readiness. L1 stated "Those aspects should be blended indirectly in the lessons, so students learn their usage and relevance in specific contexts", L2 explained that

".. tech vocabulary by theme and usage, not memorisation lists. Divide into workplace theme (meeting, deadline, schedule, colleague, manager) and college theme (assignment, lecturer, semester) for example. Students should use these words in speaking or writing contexts. ...Today's communication is digital. Students need to know writing professional emails, online meeting etiquette and chat professionalism. These real workplace skills."

L3 commented the use of grammar and vocabulary "... can be taught in role-plays and presentations. ..Digital communication skills can also be incorporated to promote effective and responsible usage", T1 answered "Yes, they should be implicitly included in activities", T2 remarked "Yes, to convey meanings and be understood. Student also need to be IT literate, so they have extra edge than the others", and lastly, T3 replied "yes, they all are important and can be included". The findings promote the advantages from language instruction that reflects realistic communicative requirements particularly for those transitioning from school to tertiary education or the workforce.

Majority of the academics also agreed that contents should extensively focus on communication at workplace as L2 stated "Although SPM leavers move into different pathways with some continue to university, while others enter employment, I think workplace communication is crucial" which is supported by T1, T2 and T3 who asserted that "English to communicate at work would be beneficial to them. Now that they have left school", "Learning materials focusing on working situations would be better", and "Contents concentrating on English usage at work is great because students can practice the skills they may in the future" respectively. However, two lecturers stressed on that focusing on skills for both academic and workplace communication. L1 emphasized on "the importance of language skills that will help them both in the university and workplace" and L3 pointed out that "students need both academic English and workplace communication". Even though the majority believed in the focus for a module that caters to immediate, post-secondary school needs and future employment requirements, conversely, some still advocate for a balanced approach. Thus, the focal point of the module's content is workplace communication skills without leaving out some academic skills to assure students' success in tertiary education and future employment endeavors.

The findings also reveal seventeen types of module content recommended by the participants. Table 3 summarizes the contents by dividing them into two categories namely academic and workplace settings. Academic setting comprises twelve academic writing and speaking genres which are report, essay, summary, scholarship application letter, writing for social media, news article analysis, telephoning skills, professional self-introduction, product pitching, presentation using social media, writing for instant messaging application and debate. Meanwhile, workplace setting consists of seven employment-related communication scenarios such as e-mail, report, resume, job application letter, job interview and meeting.

**Table 3: Summary of Module Content**

<b>Academic Setting</b>	<b>L1</b>	<b>L2</b>	<b>L3</b>	<b>T1</b>	<b>T2</b>	<b>T3</b>	<b>Total</b>
Report	/	/	/	/			4
Essay		/					1
Summary		/			/		2
Scholarship Application Letter	/	/		/	/	/	5
Writing For Media Social				/		/	2
News Article Analysis					/	/	2
Telephoning Skills	/			/		/	3
Professional Self-Introduction	/			/	/		3
Product Pitching					/		1
Presentation Using Digital Media	/			/	/		3
Writing For Instant Messaging Application	/		/	/			3
Debate		/			/		2
<b>Workplace Setting</b>							
Email	/	/	/	/	/	/	6
Report	/	/		/			3
Resume	/	/		/			3
Job Application Letter	/	/		/	/	/	5
Job Interview	/	/					2
Meeting	/			/			2
Presentation Using Digital Media	/			/	/	/	4

This classification denotes a compelling acknowledgement that SPM leavers transitioning to higher education need preparation for both university-focused and employment-focused communication challenges. Notably, the academic setting exceeds the workplace setting, insinuating that the participants believe the immediate post-secondary school's main concern is academic readiness, while workplace preparation, even though vital, may be seen as either secondary or incorporated within academic contexts.

## Conclusion

The significance of the study lies in the emphasis on conducting a needs analysis before developing a preparatory English language module for SPM leavers transitioning to higher education and employment. The findings prove that speaking is a fundamental skill required for thriving academic and professional endeavors, followed by writing. Participants frequently highlighted the need to boost learners' communicative proficiency, particularly in settings involving interaction, presentation, and professional communication. These findings indicate that university- and career-specific language skills should be incorporated to bridge the gap between secondary education and the linguistic expectations of tertiary education and profession.

Additionally, the study reveals that language teaching should strive beyond the conventional four (4) language skills. Instead, it should include grammar, vocabulary, technology, and digital literacy. Furthermore, participants highlighted that the features should be integrated into

authentic communicative activities rather than taught separately. The method promotes contextualized language proficiency among learners while enhancing digital communication competencies necessary in present academic and professional environments. The focus on workplace communication, while keeping designated academic communication components, further underscores the need for a holistic curriculum that prepares learners for diverse post-secondary paths.

Finally, the study substantiates that a variety of academic and workplace communication genres could be incorporated into the preparatory module. Suggested content comprises academic writing tasks, presentations, scholarship applications, digital communication, emails, resumes, job application letters, interviews, and workplace meetings. Collectively, the findings offer guidance for curriculum designers and educators in creating a comprehensive English preparatory program that addresses learners' pressing and forthcoming needs. Future studies should further explore not only the perceptions of university students but also those of employers and industry stakeholders, to validate and refine the recommended module content and ensure its applicability to ever-changing academic and professional demands.

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