

Rethinking the Employability of EFL Learners:

Perspectives and Solutions

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Abstract:

The job market constantly launches new standards and parameters for employment and employability in all arenas. This increases risks and impedes for fresh graduates to be appropriately recruited. For instance, graduates of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) find themselves, at the end of their academic cursus, bound to become a teacher of English or to remain jobless. Unfortunately, these graduates are highly influenced by the new benchmarks of employability. Although the English language is maintained as the global language and proficiency in English would tremendously escalate and boost employability, graduates of English are still torn between two binary situations: unemployment or the occupation of a position, if any, that has nothing to do with university education.

Keywords: Employment, EFL, employability, education, job market

Introduction

In the era of globalisation, the job market witnessed the initiation of new benchmarks that totally reversed the balance of powers and reconfigured the parameters of employment and employability. Indeed, the emphasis is no more on the gained diploma, neither on the university education. Instead, the key component and the focal element that would guarantee employment is a package of interrelated skills and competencies.

Henceforth, it is very imperative for any individual to master a set of specific skills in order to warrant the economic well-being. However, not all faculties, institutions and schools are promoting and developing

the necessary prerequisites among their adherents to effectively fit the newly set requirements of the global market. Graduates of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are good examples. Actually, around 420 students at

Abstrait

Le marché du travail lance constamment de nouvelles normes et paramètres pour l'emploi et l'employabilité dans tous les domaines. Cela augmente les risques et les entraves pour que les nouveaux diplômés soient recrutés de manière appropriée. Par exemple, les diplômés de l'anglais en tant que langue étrangère (EFL) se trouvent, à la fin de leur cursus académique, obligés à devenir un enseignant de l'anglais ou à rester sans emploi. Malheureusement, ces diplômés sont fortement influencés par les nouveaux critères d'embauche. Bien que la langue anglaise soit maintenue alors que la langue et la maîtrise en anglais augmenteraient énormément et stimuleront l'employabilité, les diplômés de l'anglais sont toujours présents entre deux situations binaires: le chômage ou l'occupation d'un poste, le cas échéant, qui n'a rien à voir avec l'enseignement universitaire ...

Mots-clés: Emploi, employabilité, EFL. éducation. marché du travail

the Department of English (Batna-2 University, Algeria) graduated each year (Head of the Department of English, 2017). Unfortunately, only 200 are allowed to carry on the LMD formation and gain the Master degree (Head of the Department of English, 2017), the aspect that would broaden their employability through prioritising and permitting them to become teachers of English at middle and high schools. Contrarily, the remaining 220 graduates would certainly find themselves in the intersection of occupying a position, if any, that does not require their academic diploma (BA in English) or remaining jobless.

This paper aims at highlighting some skills that would enhance and boost employment and employability. Also, it canvasses the issue of the employability of the Foreign Language graduates in order to find ways out through suggesting must-have skills that should be targeted by foreign language curriculum and teachers.

Skills to Improve Economic Well-Being

Economic well-being is intimately interrelated with employment skills. Likewise, finding the appropriate job and sustaining it would assuredly necessitate prerequisite qualifications and competencies that would help the individual perform effectively and efficiently. The question that might arise here is: “ What are the necessary and imperative skills that would improve the employability of individuals?”.

Specialists in the field suggest various skills and competencies the individual should develop to guarantee the occupation of better positions (Needleman, 1995; Robinson,2000). Transferable skills, for instance, refer to the ingenuity and particular qualities that would be developed not necessarily in professional institutions, but throughout life experience. Indeed, transferable skills encompass three main sub-categories namely basic academic, higher-order thinking skills, and personal traits and qualities (Robinson,2000). Besides, these sub-categories comprise a set of relevant skills and competencies.

Firstly, basic academic skills include the ability to communicate, read and write, and understand numerical figures and equations. Applicants for a given job should be capable of effectively managing their oral and written messages towards the goal of their communication. Subsequently, they should be active listeners, the fact that would positively contribute to the success of the process of communication. Additionally, candidates should be conscious of the appropriate interpretation of body language codes, and gestures.

Secondly, higher-order thinking skills through which the individual could create, solve a problem, make a decision and evaluate a situation (Lewis and Smith,1993). These skills facilitate for the individual the process of learning and acquiring new skills. Furthermore, they allow him to inquire into reliable information in order to efficiently and rationally judge a situation to make the appropriate decision. These aspects are very desirable by employers. Henceforth, it is very necessary for job applicants to develop reasoning skills.

Thirdly, the category of personal traits and qualities contains a set of beneficial attributes that are of paramount importance in the enhancement of employability. Motivation, integrity, self-management, collaboration and cooperation, punctuality, flexibility, responsibility, honesty, social skills and positive attitudes towards self-improvement are good examples. Certainly, these criteria would tremendously help the individual to act appropriately in the work context. Actually, they emanate cogent performance, adequate comportment and, therefore, success and brilliance.

Similarly, job applicants should be globally literate. In other words, they should master the use of technology devices. Accordingly, familiarity with information and communication technology (ICT) would assuredly increase employment opportunities. Moreover, intercultural competence is a set of interrelated knowledge, skills, attitudes and awareness that would orient the individual towards proper and suitable behaviours in a multicultural context (Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2000).

The aforementioned skills are not the mere benchmarks that promote employment and employability. However, they are vital for every graduate and job candidate. In this regard, this small-scale investigation inquires into the issue of EFL graduates' employment. Also, it examines the extent to which these graduates have developed the necessary skills that would multiply their recruitment opportunities.

Methodology Design

Population and Sampling. The population targeted by this investigation is graduates of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the Department of English at Mostefa Benboulaïd Batna-2 University. Since it would be unmanageable to work on the whole population (more than 900 graduates) and to guarantee representativeness, 200 EFL graduates were randomly selected.

Data gathering tools.

- A questionnaire that contains a set of open-ended questions was administered to our sample's subjects (See Appendix I).
- An interview has been conducted with ten experts in economy to analyse the market needs and the newly established requirements (See Appendix II).

Data analysis. Data gathered were organised, analysed and interpreted with the help of two software: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and NVivo. Respectively, SPSS has been mainly used to analyse the quantitative data, in contrast, NVivo has been utilised to thoroughly examine the qualitative data.

Findings and Discussion:

Analysis of Students' Questionnaire

Results, as shown in figure 1, highlight that the sample of this investigation is composed of 30% male and 70% female. Additionally, 20% are fresh graduates whereas the remaining 80% have had more than one year after getting their diploma of licence.

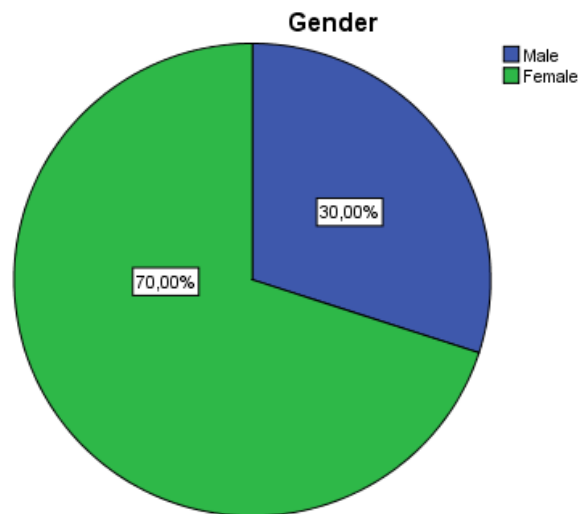


Figure 01. Participants' gender

Item 1. You had your BA in English in 20.....

Figure 2 summarises respondents answers.

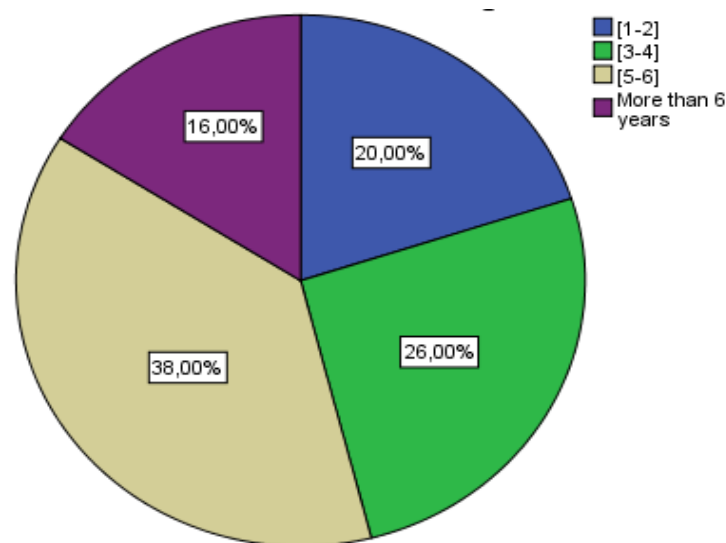


Figure 02. Years after graduation

Item 2. Why have you chosen English?

Respondents' answers indicate (See figure 3) that 70% selected the field of English as a Foreign Language because their grades and scores in the exam of baccalaureate did not permit them to submit for other specialities and domains. Regrettably, this category of graduates has a certain propensity towards despising the discipline of learning foreign languages. Indeed, they put forward that they were obliged and constrained to pursue English classes. Profoundly, responses determine a wrongly founded conviction gained in the Algerian society and particularly the Batnian culture wherein foreign languages are not highly valued neither appropriately perceived. On the other hand, only 30 % of graduates have chosen English for the reason that they

are aware of the global requirements. Accordingly, they are conscious of the need for multilingualism and interculturality.

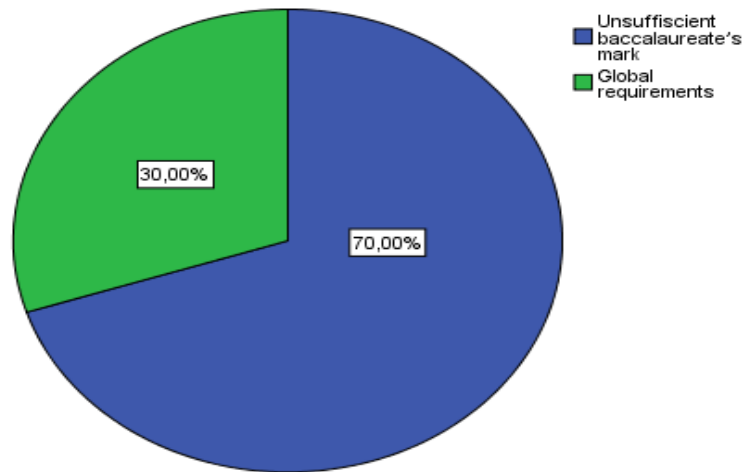


Figure 03. Reasons behind choosing the English Language

Item 3 & 4. What have you learned during the three years of licence?, Which of these skills has been targeted during the licence formation: IT (information of technology), intercultural awareness, linguistic competence, communicative skills, critical thinking skills and creativity?

When asked about the skills acquired and developed throughout the three years of licence, the persistent majority (90%) of graduates hold that only some linguistic skills were promoted. According to figure 4, few rules of grammar, specific vocabulary and body of information pertaining to the culture of the UK and the USA were acquired. The remaining 10% pinpointed that in addition to the above skills, they developed team spirit, some communication skills and elementary knowledge about teaching and learning. Unfortunately, students totally neglected and ignored higher-order thinking skills like problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity. Moreover, they overlooked personal traits such as collaboration, cooperation, self-management, and professional principles. This leads us to pose the following questions: "Is the promotion of higher-order thinking skills and personal qualities disregarded by the process of foreign language education?" or "Does this latter fail to effectively achieve the fundamental goal of education?"

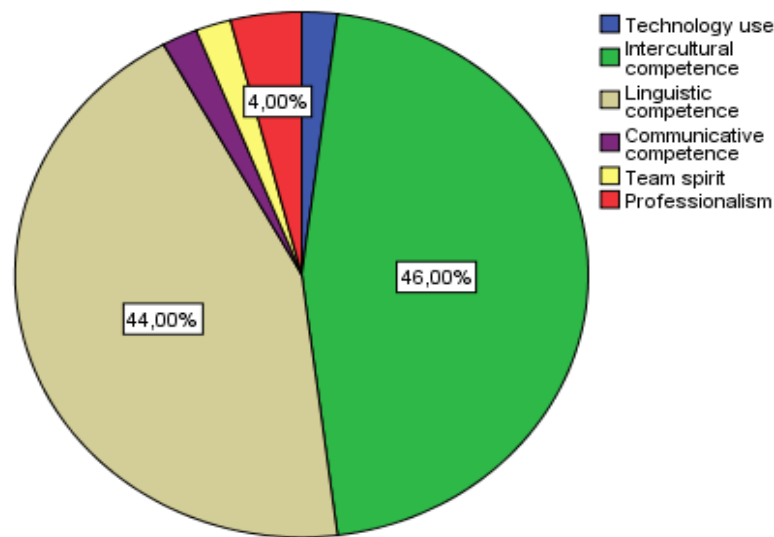


Figure 04. The gained skills and competencies

Item 4,5, 6&7: “have you found a job? ”, “If yes, what kind of job?”, “are you using what you have learned at university during your work?”, “ Does the gained diploma facilitate you employability?”

Surprisingly, 80 %of respondents are jobless. Although they obtained their licence two years ago, they are still unemployed. Only10% of graduates succeeded to find a job. However, positions occupiedby these alums have no relation with their academic education. Particularly, some of them have launched their own business, and the others have had the opportunity of being employed as a secretary, receptionist, accountant and babysitter. The fact that could be deduced from respondents’ answers is that there exist no clear benchmarks in the job market that guarantee appropriate positions for specific skills. Thoroughly, graduates postulated that neither academic formation nor the diploma of licence in English as a Foreign Language has paved for them the path towards economic well-being. Indeed, they believed that the pursued formation failed to yield multilingual and intercultural agents. Also, they viewed that the main objective of the process of Foreign language education is ambiguous and imprecise as it could not, at least, generate graduates who effectively master the English language and its use.

Item 8: Name some skills that could enhance the employability of the graduates of English.

Proper manipulation of technology devices, problem-solving skills and appropriate use of English in specific contexts were highly emphasised among responses. Graduates manifested a degree of awareness of the job market needs. Henceforth, they suggested the integration of specific modules into the Foreign language curricula. The purpose of these modules is to effectively promote and develop intercultural awareness, digital literacy, critical thinking. Furthermore, they argued that foreign language education should take into account the requirements of the global job market while setting its objectives and goals. Responses determined a high level of consciousness among graduates. Ultimately, they demonstrated awareness of the major aims of the process of education and demanded skills that would improve employability. Their answers were compatible with experts’ reflections considered in the section below.

Analysis of Experts' Interview

The ten interviewees assented with specialists in the field of employment and employability. Those experts were randomly selected from the Employment Institution called National Agency for Employment (ANEM). Regarding data, they agreed on the fact that technology use, communicative skills and critical thinking skills are integral and fundamental aspects that would tremendously improve the employability of individuals. Additionally, they focused on some personal qualities like collaboration, self-control, integrity, professionalism, flexibility and readiness to acquire new competencies. Furthermore, they mentioned some of the newly set skills like intercultural awareness, ICTs' appropriate manipulation and accommodation, leadership, management and marketing competencies.

Experts eminently concentrated on the benefits of the aforementioned skills and traits in the employment of graduates in general and graduates of English as a Foreign Language in particular. Besides, they maintained that curriculum designers and decision-makers should identify and analyse demands of economic sectors. Also, interviewees concentrated on the necessity of sociolinguistic surveys and linguistic auditing in the enhancement of graduates' employment. Notably, experts claimed that graduates of English could be effectively employed in some global expat services like health and environment, visa and residence, and culture understanding. Furthermore, they suggested that graduates of English should be suitably trained to work as intercultural coaches, voice-overs and cultural diplomats and ambassadors. Also, still according to those experts, alums could be hired in the following domains: transcreation, translation and intercultural education.

A thorough analysis of experts' responses manifests that the reconciliation of theory is unavoidable. Hence, new ways and methods should be adopted in the fields of humanities and social sciences. Indeed, ICTs, creative and critical thinking, foreign languages and other skills should be immediately integrated into, and targeted by, the process of teaching English as a foreign language. This would assuredly promote and diversify employment and employability of graduates of English.

Conclusion:

Proficiency in English is one of the competencies that would enormously escalate and boost employability. Yet, graduates of English are still unable to be recruited in appropriate positions. Unfortunately, the formation they received does not permit them to become a well-instructed and trained teacher neither to occupy other posts that are related to their academic education. A posteriori, respondents' answers unveil the fact that the process of teaching English as a Foreign Language has failed to effectively achieve its goal. Indeed, the result is graduates with a Bachelor of Art (B.A) in English who are unable even to speak English appropriately, the fact that would certainly deteriorate the reputation of the Foreign language education. The question that might be raised here is "if the Foreign Language Education does not succeed in yielding individuals who can use foreign languages accordingly, what is the purpose of foreign language education, then?". Therefore, foreign language education should be reviewed, rethought and reoriented towards clearly established goals and objectives. Respectively, the process of teaching English as a foreign language at the Department of English at Mostefa Benboulaïd Batna-2 University has to be innovated to fit the new requirements and benchmarks initiated by the global job market.

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Appendix I

Dear respondents,

Would you, please, fill in this questionnaire to help us complete our research on the employment and employability of Foreign Language graduates. Information provided will be used only for the sake of our research and will remain anonymous.

Thank you.

Gender: Female Male

You had your BA in English in 20.....

Why have you chosen to study English at the university?

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After three years of formation, what are the main skills that you have developed?

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Which of these competencies and qualities has been targeted during the licence formation?

- Technology use
- Intercultural competence
- Linguistic competence
- Communicative competence
- Critical thinking skills
- Creativity
- Problem solving
- Team spirit
- Professionalism

Have you found a job?

Yes No

If yes, what type of job?

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Are you using what you have learned at university?

Yes No

To what extent has your diploma facilitated your employment?

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.....

Name some skills that would help you in getting a job?

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Appendix II

Interview questions:

1. What are the main skills required by employers?
2. What are the newly focused on skills?
3. What are the deficiencies that hinder foreign language graduates from getting a job?
4. What should it be done to diversify and multiply opportunities for EFL graduates?