



EXPLORING JOB SATISFACTION AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS OF ENGLISH-MAJOR GRADUATES: IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPERS

*Mai Minh Tien**, *Ly Kim Ngan*, *Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan*, *Nguyen Thi Hoa*, *Nguyen Bao Tho*

Ho Chi Minh City Open University

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ABSTRACT

This study examines English-major graduates' job satisfaction and the impact of their undergraduate education on their employability skills. Survey results reveal that the majority are satisfied with their current job while the undergraduate education has a positive impact on the graduates' employability. The paper provides updates for curriculum developers in response to new market demands.

Keywords: graduates, job satisfaction, employability, curriculum development.

TÓM TẮT

Khảo sát mức độ hài lòng trong công việc và kỹ năng nghề nghiệp của sinh viên tốt nghiệp chuyên ngành tiếng Anh

Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu về mức độ hài lòng và tác động của chương trình đào tạo lên kỹ năng nghề nghiệp của các sinh viên mới ra trường trong chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh. Kết quả khảo sát cho thấy, phần đông sinh viên mới ra trường hài lòng với công việc hiện tại và có nhận xét tích cực đối với chương trình học. Nghiên cứu cũng bổ sung các cập nhật cần thiết nhằm thiết kế chương trình đào tạo đáp ứng với nhu cầu của thị trường lao động.

Từ khóa: sinh viên mới tốt nghiệp, mức độ hài lòng, kỹ năng nghề nghiệp, chương trình đào tạo.

1. Introduction

237,000 Vietnamese job seekers with a bachelor's degree were unemployed in 2017 (Kim Chi, 2018). What causes that alarming unemployment figure could be attributed to graduates' lack of employability skills and English proficiency (Pham, 2017).

Finding a suitable job could be a daunting task. Graduates are required to possess employability skills which affect their workplace satisfaction. A growing body of research on Vietnamese students' employability skills have been carried out across disciplines: humanities and social sciences (Pham V. Q., 2017), business administration (Bui, 2016), tourism

* Email: tien.mm@ou.edu.vn

(Nguyen et al., 2011), and special education (Do, 2009). However, no research has been conducted to investigate English-major graduates' job satisfaction and employability skills in tertiary education in Vietnam.

To fill such gaps, we set out to examine the factors that affect recent graduates' satisfaction at the workplace and the vital employability skills that graduates have acquired from their undergraduate education. From the graduates' perspectives, this study informs curriculum designers and developers of how the curriculum should be revised to respond to emerging employment needs in the era of globalization.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is one of the most important determinants of labor productivity and corporate efficiency. Nevertheless, definitions of job satisfaction have not been unified. Job satisfaction could be referred to as employees' awareness of attainment in relation to their needs, desires and experiences in a business organization (Davis & Nestrom, 1985). It can be defined as the extent of content when they are rewarded for their achievement, especially in terms of ambition and inspiration (Statt, 2004). On the other hand, job dissatisfaction might happen when employees hold unfavorable attitudes towards their place of work (Armstrong, 2006). In short, the feeling and beliefs of employees can be indicators of job satisfaction, which could fluctuate between extremely dissatisfied and extremely satisfied.

2.2. Employability skills

According to The Confederation of British Industry (as cited in Bridgstock, 2009), employability entails "the qualities and competencies required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers and thereby help to realize his or her aspirations and potential in work" (1999, p. 1). Studies have identified employability skills that fresh graduates need to improve their performance, affecting their level of job satisfaction. According to Robles (2012), soft skills, known as intrapersonal skills, are equally important in comparison with hard skills. Employability can enable them to manage themselves or the way they interact with others (Lacker & Powell, 2011). Educators are expected to integrate soft skills and hard skills into the curriculum in response to the new demands of the labor markets.

Boyatzis (2008) identified competencies of employability: *professional expertise* - the level of knowledge, ability, and professional skills of a person; *anticipation and optimization* - an individual's ability to anticipate changes and the ability to actively react to those changes; *personal flexibility* - the extent to which a person can adapt and be flexible with changes; *corporate sense* - the level of individual awareness and participation; and finally, *balance* - an individual's control between personal interests and needs with the priorities of the work team and organization.

English language teaching skills

Cambridge English Teaching Framework categorizes competencies of an English language education professional on their understanding of:

- Learning and the Learner;
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment;
- Language Ability;
- Language Knowledge and Awareness, and
- Professional Development and Values.

Borg and Edmett (2018) conducted a survey of teachers in 125 countries to validate a self-assessment tool for teacher development. The participants are provided with a list of nine necessary professional skills of the profession: Planning lessons and courses, managing the lesson, understanding learners, knowing the subject, managing resources, assessing learning, integrating information and communications technology (ICT), using inclusive practices, and promoting 21st-century skills. Findings indicate that the teachers found the tool relevant for their professional development.

Translation skills

Translation skills are categorized into competency systems including interpersonal competences, and instrumental competences. A framework proposed by Rotheneder (2007) requires translators to possess linguistic competence, intercultural competence, and information and knowledge management.

2.3. Vietnamese graduates and employability

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate Vietnamese graduates and employability. For example, in Bui's study (2016), graduates of business administration of a university in the north of Vietnam should enhance professional communication skills although the employers are impressed with their adaptability. Nguyen et al. (2011) reported that professional knowledge has a profound impact on tourism graduates in the Mekong Delta. It is not surprising to learn that non-English-major graduates have problems using English for the workplace (Bui et al., 2017).

Apart from general employability skills, this paper examines the graduates' specific skills sets drawing upon the data collected from graduates of two specializations: English language teaching and interpretation/translation, which will further inform the designers of English-major curriculum of the voices of graduates from the workplace.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research questions

This quantitative case study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent are graduates satisfied with their jobs?

2. What are the graduates' perceptions of the impact of their undergraduate education on their employability skills?

3.2. Population and sample size

The informants of the study are mainstream English majors who graduated between 2015 and 2017 from a public university in the south of Vietnam (see table 1). Three specializations were classified: Teaching, Business English, and Translation/Interpretation. The questionnaires were emailed to 123 graduates, and 47 valid responses were received. The teaching specialization accounted for 57.4 percent while the business - translation and interpretation specializations comprised of 42.6 percent of the respondents.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics

Characteristics		Graduation year			Total
		2015	2016	2017	
Specialization	Gender				
Teaching	Male	0	2	2	4
	Female	2	12	9	23
Business and Translation/ Interpretation	Male	0	0	9	9
	Female	0	5	6	11
Total		2	19	26	47

Students who were employed upon graduation accounted for more than half of the total number of students who were surveyed (57.5%). There are a few students being employed after 6 months of graduation (4.2%). Especially, in the specializations of Business English and Translation/Interpretation, graduates can find a job within 6 months.

3.3. Data collection and procedure

A 16-item questionnaire was adapted from Spector (1985), covering questions regarding salary and welfare, training and promotion opportunities, working environment, relationship with colleagues and superiors, and nature of work to evaluate the graduates' job satisfaction. A 5-point Likert scale (*totally dissatisfied, dissatisfied, neutral, satisfied and totally satisfied*) was adopted.

As regards employability, based on Robles (2012), criteria of *teamwork, communication, adaptability, time management and critical thinking* were used to identify graduates' perceptions of the undergraduate education on their employability. A 5-point Likert scale was similarly utilized (*totally disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and totally*

agree). For teaching majors, a 10-question set adapted from Cambridge English Teaching Framework (n.d.) was modified. For translation/interpretation majors, the questions were adapted from PETRA-E Framework of Reference for the Education and Training of Literary Translators (n.d). Open-ended prompts were embedded to ask respondents for in-depth information.

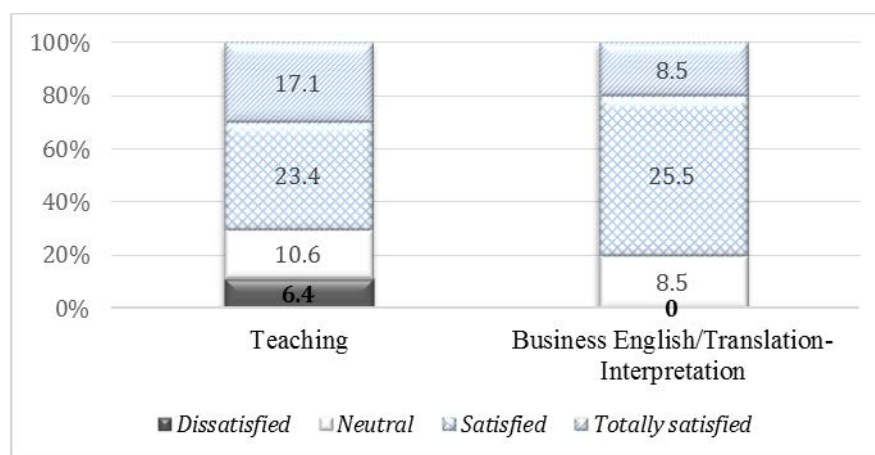
The questionnaires were first administered with a cohort of 4 graduates for initial trialing before being publicly released.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. RQ1: To what extent are graduates satisfied with their jobs?

Figure 1. Summary of statistics of graduates' job satisfaction

<i>Mean</i>	3.9
<i>Standard Error</i>	0.1
<i>Median</i>	4
<i>Mode</i>	4
<i>Standard Deviation</i>	0.82



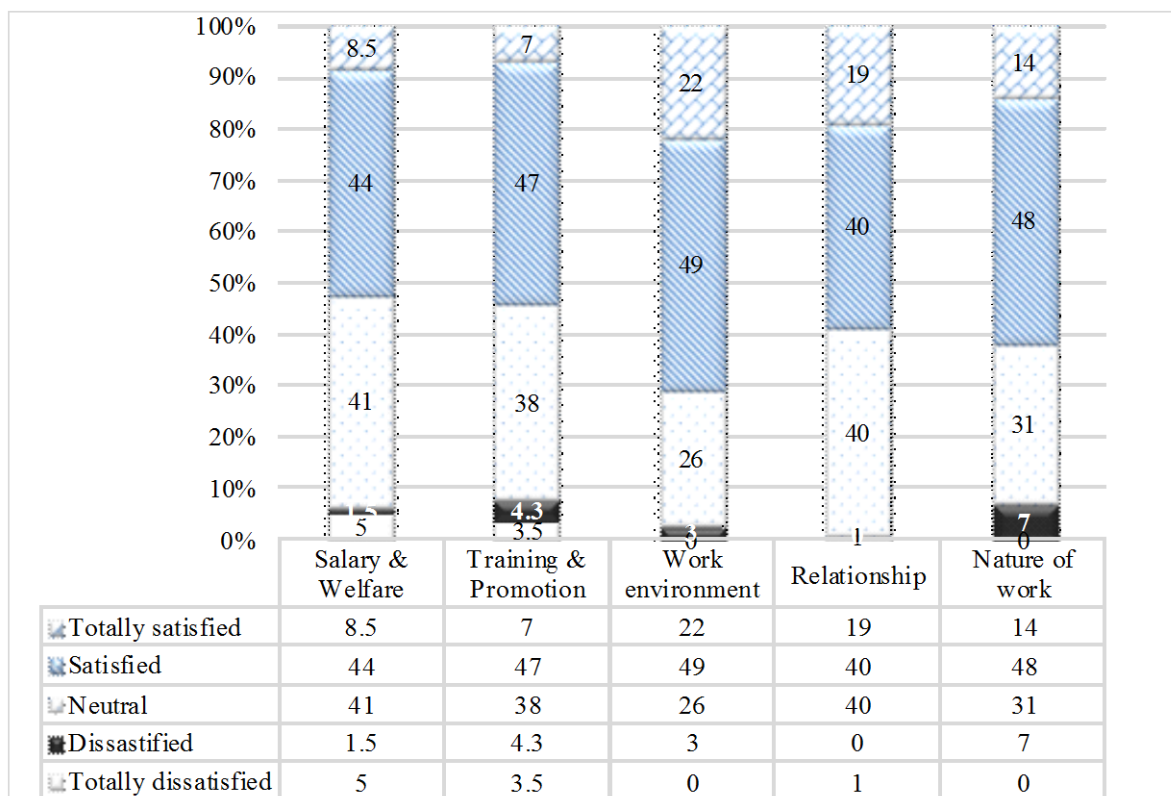
As can be seen from figure 1, the descriptive statistics show that graduates were generally satisfied with their current job (Mean=3.9 on a 5-point scale), with only a minority of teaching-major graduates (6.4%) expressed dissatisfaction.

Overall, work environment may be the factor that affects job satisfaction the most since approximately 71% of alumni agree that they are satisfied or totally satisfied with it (see figure 2 below). The findings are consistent with a study conducted by Raziq and Maulabakhsh (2015), showing that work environment has a great effect on job satisfaction. Moreover, according to the statistics, the relationship with co-workers and superiors also

plays an important role in deciding employees’ perception toward job satisfaction with 59.6% respondents expressing positive feelings.

Also noteworthy is that a minority of fresh graduates (no more than 5%) are totally dissatisfied with their current salary, welfare, and opportunities for training and promotion.

Figure 2. Details of graduates’ level of job satisfaction



4.2. RQ2: What are the graduates’ perceptions of the impact of their undergraduate education on their employability skills?

Data from figure 3 illustrates that teamwork is considered as one of the best trained skill at the university, with nearly 50% of graduates indicating their satisfaction. Graduates are satisfied with communication training: More than 80% of graduates think that the level of training is good. Of this, 6.4% said that this skill is trained extremely well at school. On the other hand, nearly 30% of graduates have problems with time management. To further the discussion, valuable remarks are elaborated on different skills:

Communication and teamwork

“Fresh graduates lack a pro-active attitude. They are easily isolated at the workplace if they lack communication and teamwork skills. Communication with colleagues and supervisors as well as work attitudes really matter. I hope that the faculty should focus on

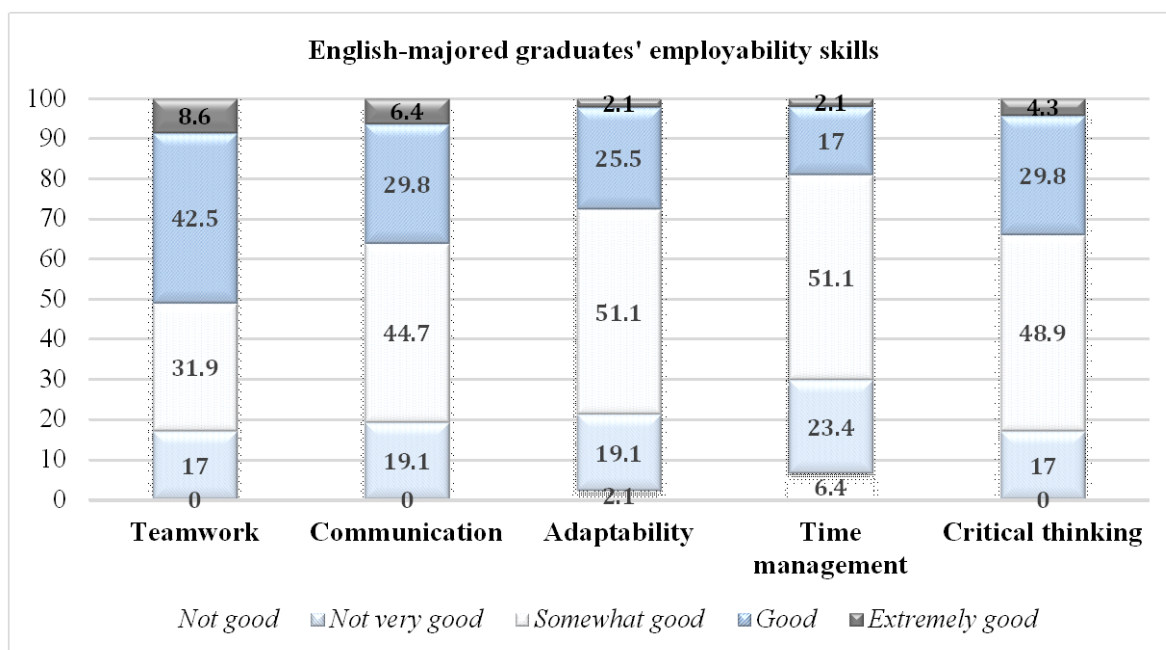
these, especially the work attitudes. Many fresh graduates only aim to earn a living for themselves rather than making a contribution to their workplace.” (S28)

“There should be activities involving introverts who might not be interested in socializing.” (S30)

Critical thinking: Students are frustrated during the decision-making process: “We should learn about how to choose the right working environment and the right supervisor. What we learn is only theory. We need to experience it to improve our employability” (S32)

Adaptability: More hours for internship are recommended for the inclusion in the curriculum so that graduates “should be exposed to realities so that they can adapt well when they graduate” (S35). This finding resonates with Bui et al. (2017) when they referred to the significance of the internship hours for undergraduate students.

Figure 3. Graduates’ assessment of the impact of the undergraduate education on their employability



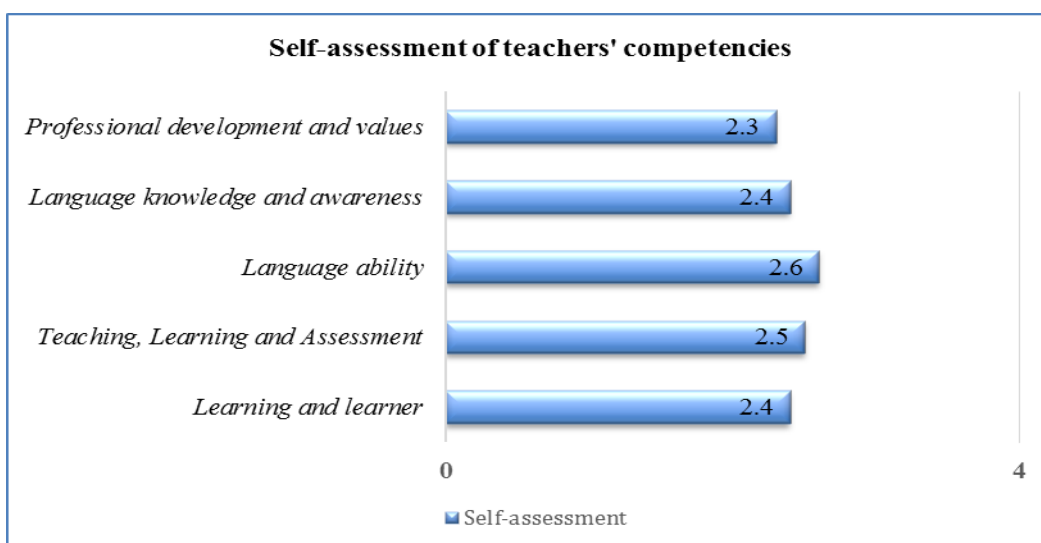
Skills of teaching-major graduates

In lights of teaching major’s competencies, the graduates achieve just above average level for each skill, ranging between 2.3 and 2.6 on a 4-point scale (see figure 4 below), reflecting that they are developing their skills set for their teaching careers. It is important to note that professional development and values receive the lowest self-assessment. The graduates also make useful recommendations so that the curriculum can better prepare future teachers: “For teaching with young learner courses, the coursebook *Family and*

Friends should be considered as it is in use in many public schools.” (S10). The curriculum should be embedded with a link between theory with practice when a respondent commented:

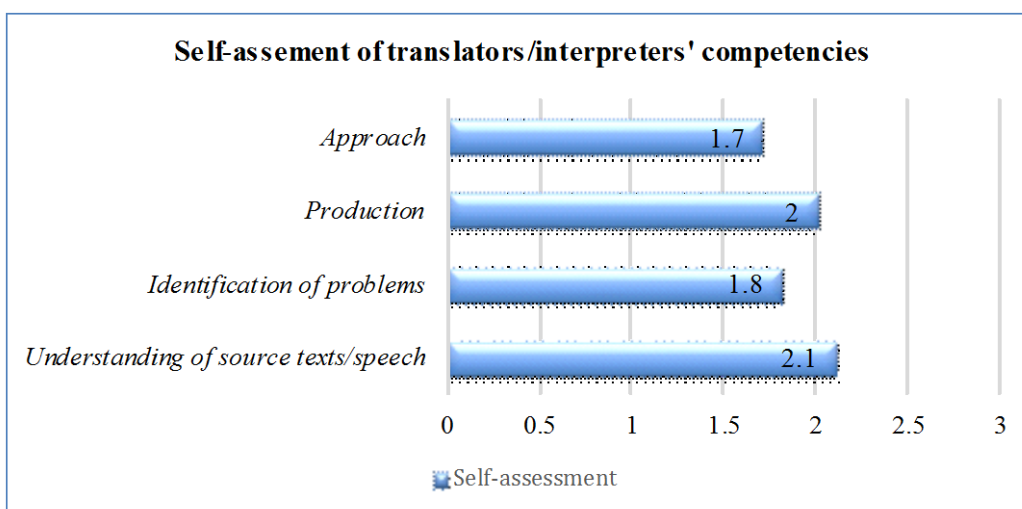
“The classroom management course should incorporate real-life classroom situations and help students to solve the problems, for example, dealing with learners with special needs (overactive, naughty, lazy, disrespectful, inattentive), or communications with parents when parents do not cooperate with teachers or pamper their children.” (S10)

Figure 4. Teaching major’s alumni self-assessed on teaching skills



Skills of translation/interpretation-major graduates

Figure 5. Self-assessment of translation/interpretation competencies



Graduates of the translation/interpretation specialization achieve above average competencies ranging from 1.7 to 2.1 on a 3-point scale (see figure 5 above). They are less confident with the identification of problems and approach to translation/interpretation. The open-ended question sheds light on how the graduates elaborate on the importance of learner autonomy and a passion for the profession:

“To be ready for the marketplace demands, students should enroll in professional translation/interpretation courses or they can practice at home under the guidance of experienced translators/interpreters. If they take extra practice, they’ll obtain extensive knowledge. Their passion will empower them to be successful in their field.” (S18)

5. Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

This study aims to fill the research gaps of English-major graduates’ employability and job satisfaction. The survey findings from 47 recent graduates of a university in the south of Vietnam specify that graduates who specialized in English language education are satisfied with their current career choices. In particular, the authors of the paper would like to put forward the following suggestions in terms of designs and development of programs for English majors in higher education.

Firstly, the curriculum should reserve extra hours for the internship in which students have opportunities to experience the realities of the workplace, where they can put theories of employability skills (teamwork, time management, communication, adaptability and critical solving skills) into practice.

Secondly, the employability skills training should cover (1) the diversity of character types (for example, introverts), (2) the critical thinking for senior students in choosing a suitable work environment, and (3) the time management techniques when students are employed.

Finally, the courses should better reflect the realistic needs of the market. For teaching specialization, it is crucial that they are exposed to difficult classroom situations, for instance, working with learners with special needs, and provided with opportunities for professional development and values. For translation/interpretation specializations, they should learn to develop their own expertise at their own pace which will help them to pursue a career that matches their passion.

A few limitations are addressed. The research project was carried out in a single setting – at a middle-range public university in Vietnam, which might limit the generalization of the survey findings. Future research should be administered at a larger scale in order to retrieve information from diverse respondents. In addition, it is important to conduct a longitudinal study on recent graduates to investigate their perceptions at different career milestones and unlock how their undergraduate education continues to impact on such events.

❖ **Conflict of Interest:** Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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