

English Proficiency and Job Opportunities in Digital Era: A Bridge or a Barrier?

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Abstract

The rapid transformation of the global labor market driven by digitalization, artificial intelligence (AI), and technological innovation has significantly reshaped the competencies required for graduate employability, positioning English proficiency as a strategic asset for workforce competitiveness. Despite the growing body of empirical research, existing evidence remains fragmented across different educational and national contexts, limiting a comprehensive understanding of the role of English proficiency in shaping employment opportunities in the digital era. This study aims to synthesize recent empirical evidence on the relationship between English proficiency and job opportunities through a qualitative literature review. The review adopted the PRISMA 2020 framework to identify, screen, and select relevant peer-reviewed studies published between 2021 and 2025 from Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). 17 studies were selected and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and conceptual relationships. The synthesis revealed five overarching themes: (1) English proficiency as employability capital, (2) English proficiency in supporting workplace communication, (3) English proficiency as a catalyst for career advancement, (4) English proficiency in enhancing digital workforce readiness, and (5) English proficiency as a barrier to employment opportunities. The findings demonstrate that English proficiency extends beyond linguistic competence and functions as a strategic component of employability by strengthening graduates' competitiveness, facilitating professional communication, promoting career mobility, and enabling participation in digitally mediated workplaces. Conversely, inadequate English proficiency continues to restrict access to employment, professional development, and international career opportunities. This review contributes to the literature by integrating empirical evidence from developing Asian countries and conceptualizing English proficiency within the frameworks of human capital, digital employability, and sustainable employability. The findings provide practical implications for higher education institutions, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing employability-oriented English language education that aligns with the evolving demands of the global digital workforce.

Keywords: digital employability; employability; English proficiency; job opportunities; qualitative literature review

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has profoundly transformed the global labor market, reshaping the competencies required for employability in the twenty-first century. The

integration of artificial intelligence (AI), automation, digital platforms, and hybrid working models has shifted employer expectations from traditional technical expertise toward broader competencies encompassing digital literacy, adaptability, communication, and lifelong learning. This transformation has altered not only the nature of work but also the qualifications expected from university graduates entering increasingly competitive labor markets. According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report (2025), technological advancement will significantly reshape global employment by 2030, with approximately 170 million new jobs expected to emerge while nearly 92 million existing jobs are projected to disappear due to structural changes in the labor market. Consequently, nearly two-fifths of workers' core competencies will require substantial updating to remain relevant in future workplaces. These projections suggest that graduate employability is no longer determined solely by disciplinary knowledge but increasingly depends on individuals' ability to continuously develop transferable competencies that enable adaptation to rapidly changing professional environments.

Within this context, communication competence has become one of the most essential employability attributes. Although digital technologies have facilitated global collaboration, effective communication remains fundamental for knowledge exchange, teamwork, problem-solving, and professional decision-making across international settings. English, as the dominant language of global communication, occupies a strategic position within this transformation because it functions as the primary medium for international business, scientific publication, technological innovation, and cross-cultural collaboration. Consequently, English proficiency extends beyond its traditional role as a linguistic competence and increasingly represents an important professional capability that enables graduates to participate effectively in digitally connected workplaces.

The growing significance of English proficiency is further reflected in international assessments of language competence. The EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) 2025, based on data from more than two million adult participants across 123 countries and regions, demonstrates considerable variation in English proficiency among developing countries. Indonesia remains within the low-proficiency category, indicating that substantial challenges persist in preparing graduates to compete effectively within global labor markets where English serves as the principal language of professional communication. These findings illustrate that English proficiency should not merely be considered an educational outcome but also a strategic component of national human capital development, particularly within countries seeking to strengthen workforce competitiveness in the digital economy.

The relationship between English proficiency and employability has attracted increasing scholarly attention during the past decade. Contemporary employability literature no longer conceptualizes employability simply as the ability to obtain employment but rather as an individual's capacity to secure, sustain, and continuously develop meaningful employment throughout changing career trajectories. Recent discussions have therefore introduced concepts such as digital employability and sustainable employability, emphasizing that long-term career success depends upon the integration of disciplinary expertise, digital competence, communication skills, adaptability, and lifelong learning. Within these frameworks, English proficiency constitutes an integral component of employability because it facilitates professional communication, international collaboration, access to knowledge resources, and participation in globally interconnected workplaces.

Empirical evidence generally supports the positive association between English proficiency and graduate employability. Studies conducted across Indonesia consistently indicate that English competence enhances graduates' preparedness for recruitment processes, workplace communication, and career advancement, particularly within multinational corporations, tourism

industries, and international business environments. Similar findings have been reported in Malaysia, where employers consistently identify effective English communication as one of the primary considerations during graduate recruitment and promotion. Likewise, studies undertaken in India and Pakistan demonstrate that English proficiency contributes to workplace readiness, professional confidence, and career mobility, particularly in sectors characterized by international collaboration and technology-intensive operations. Collectively, these studies suggest that English proficiency has evolved into a strategic employability competency across developing Asian countries.

Nevertheless, the existing literature presents several important limitations. First, previous studies have predominantly examined English proficiency within isolated national contexts or specific occupational sectors, thereby limiting broader understanding of its role across different socioeconomic environments. Second, the majority of empirical investigations emphasize the positive contribution of English proficiency to employment outcomes while providing relatively limited discussion regarding its potential role as a source of inequality within labor markets. Graduates possessing strong English competence may benefit from wider employment opportunities and greater career mobility, whereas individuals with limited language proficiency may encounter substantial barriers in accessing internationally oriented occupations, digital employment, and professional advancement. This dual role remains insufficiently synthesized within existing literature despite its growing relevance in contemporary labor markets.

Furthermore, recent workforce reports published by international organizations consistently emphasize that future employability depends upon the interaction between communication competence, technological capability, adaptability, and continuous learning rather than upon technical expertise alone. However, relatively few literature reviews have examined English proficiency from this broader perspective of digital employability and sustainable workforce development. Existing reviews generally focus on educational outcomes or language learning without sufficiently integrating developments in labor market transformation, digitalization, and emerging competency frameworks. Consequently, a comprehensive synthesis is required to explain how English proficiency functions simultaneously as an employability asset and a potential barrier within developing Asian countries undergoing rapid digital transformation.

Accordingly, this study aims to synthesize recent empirical evidence concerning the relationship between English proficiency and job opportunities in the digital era through a qualitative literature review. By integrating findings from developing Asian countries, this review seeks to identify common patterns, contextual differences, and emerging themes regarding the contribution of English proficiency to graduate employability. The findings are expected to enrich contemporary discussions on digital employability while providing practical implications for higher education institutions, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing English language education that is more responsive to the evolving demands of the global workforce.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative literature review to synthesize empirical evidence concerning the relationship between English proficiency and job opportunities in the digital era. Unlike systematic reviews that primarily focus on evaluating intervention effectiveness, qualitative literature reviews aim to critically analyze, compare, and integrate findings from previous studies to develop a broader conceptual understanding of a research topic (Snyder, 2019). This approach was considered appropriate because the present study sought to examine how English proficiency has been conceptualized as both an employability asset and a potential barrier across different educational and employment contexts in developing Asian countries.

To enhance methodological transparency, the review process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines. PRISMA provides a structured framework for identifying, screening, determining eligibility, and selecting relevant studies, thereby improving the credibility and reproducibility of literature review studies (Page et al., 2021).

Literature Search

Relevant literature was retrieved from Google Scholar, Scopus, and ERIC between March and April 2025. The search employed combinations of the following keywords using Boolean operators: "English proficiency" AND employability, "English proficiency" AND "job opportunities", "English language skills" AND employment, employability AND "digital era", English AND workforce, English proficiency AND career development. Only studies published between 2021 and 2025 were considered to ensure that the review reflected recent developments in digital transformation and labor market demands.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selected studies met the following inclusion criteria: published in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings, published between 2021 and 2025, Written in English and focused on English proficiency, employability, career development, or job opportunities. Examined contexts related to the digital era or technology-driven workplaces. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on English language teaching without discussing employability; were editorials, book reviews, theses, or opinion papers; lacked sufficient methodological information.

Article Selection Process

The article selection process followed the PRISMA framework. The initial database search identified 145 records. After removing 20 duplicate articles, 125 studies remained for title and abstract screening. Subsequently, 87 articles were excluded because they did not examine English proficiency in relation to employability or job opportunities. The remaining 38 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 17 empirical studies were included in the final synthesis.

Data Analysis

The selected studies were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the final report. Through this analytical process, five overarching themes emerged: English proficiency enhances employability; English supports workplace communication; English facilitates career advancement; English contributes to digital workforce readiness; and English proficiency may function as a barrier to employment. These themes formed the basis for the Findings and Discussion section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

From this qualitative literature review, across studies from Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, and India, the consistent finding is that English proficiency plays a crucial role in employability, career advancement, and access to global opportunities. English skills are widely recognized as essential not only for securing jobs in competitive sectors such as marketing, tourism, informatics, and export-import but also for achieving promotions, improving workplace performance, and breaking employment barriers in both local and international contexts.

The studies also highlight that English supports broader competencies, including productivity, teamwork, communication in multinational environments, and participation in the

global economy. Because of these demands, many studies emphasize the urgent need for improved English training, better curriculum design, and targeted skill-development programs to meet global workforce expectations.

Table 1. Some Selected Studies

No	Country	Author (Year)	Job Sector	Main Finding
1	Indonesia	Aam Alamsyah et al. (2024)	Marketing & Export	English is required in marketing and export–import departments.
2	Indonesia	Komari et al. (2025)	General Employment	English proficiency increases promotion opportunities and access to global firms.
3	Indonesia	Muhammad Taufik Hidayat (2024)	Higher Education	Students need English proficiency for career advancement.
4	Indonesia	Khoiriyatul Annisa et al. (2023)	Tourism	English communication significantly supports employability in tourism.
5	Indonesia	Farid Noor Romadlon & Muhammad Arifin (2021)	General Employment	English proficiency improves recruitment and career promotion.
6	Indonesia	Umul Khoiriyah et al. (2025)	Multinational Companies	English enhances productivity, teamwork, and cross-cultural collaboration.
7	Pakistan	Dodo Khan Alias Khalid Malokani et al. (2023)	General Employment	English proficiency is essential for obtaining better jobs.
8	Pakistan	Heera Yaqoob et al. (2025)	Corporate Sector	English competence contributes to longer career development.
9	Pakistan	Rana Imran Ali et al. (2022)	Private Sector	English proficiency increases employability and career success.
10	India	Fatima Akther (2022)	Higher Education	English facilitates employability and international communication.
11	India	Anjar Nuryatin et al. (2021)	Education	English learning supports employability skills development.
12	India	Job Training, English Language Skills, and Employability (2025)	Urban Employment	English training significantly improves employment opportunities and wages.
13	Malaysia	Nur Iqliah Maksan et al. (2025)	Graduate Employability	English proficiency significantly improves graduates' employability.
14	Malaysia	Zuraina Ali et al. (2025)	Employers & Universities	Employers prioritize practical communication skills over grammatical accuracy.
15	Malaysia	Ne'matullah et al. (2025)	Recruitment	English speaking during interviews increases employability.
16	Malaysia	Wan Irham Ishak et al. (2025)	Graduate Economy	English is constructed as a form of employability capital in the graduate labor market.
17	Malaysia	Chow Poh Ling & Phuah Kit Teng (2025)	Cross-national Employment	Digital literacy and employability are closely related across Malaysia and Indonesia.

Discussion

The thematic analysis of the 17 selected empirical studies identified five interrelated themes that explain the role of English proficiency in shaping employability in the digital era. Although the reviewed studies were conducted across different countries, educational settings, and employment

sectors, they consistently highlighted the strategic importance of English proficiency in responding to the changing demands of the global labor market. The synthesis revealed that English proficiency contributes to employability by enhancing graduates' competitiveness, facilitating workplace communication, supporting career advancement, and strengthening digital workforce readiness. At the same time, inadequate English competence remains a significant obstacle that limits access to employment opportunities. The five themes identified are presented below.

English Proficiency as Employability Capital

The thematic analysis revealed that English proficiency is consistently recognized as a strategic component of graduate employability across developing Asian countries. The majority of the reviewed studies reported that graduates with strong English proficiency have greater opportunities to secure employment, particularly in sectors characterized by international communication, digital services, multinational corporations, tourism, and information technology. Regardless of the differences in geographical contexts, the reviewed studies demonstrated a common pattern indicating that employers increasingly perceive English proficiency as a competitive advantage during recruitment and employee selection. This finding suggests that English proficiency is no longer viewed solely as a language competency but rather as an employability resource that enables graduates to compete in an increasingly globalized labor market.

Several studies conducted in Indonesia reported that English proficiency enhances graduates' confidence during recruitment processes, facilitates workplace communication, and increases employment opportunities in international companies. Similar findings were observed in Malaysia, where employers emphasized communicative competence as one of the most desirable graduate attributes, particularly for positions involving customer interaction and international collaboration. Likewise, studies from India and Pakistan consistently found that English proficiency contributes to workplace readiness, professional confidence, and career mobility. Collectively, these studies indicate that English proficiency has become an important determinant of graduates' competitiveness in today's labor market.

These findings support the Human Capital Theory, which argues that investments in education and skills enhance individuals' productivity, employability, and economic value (Becker, 1964). Although originally developed within the context of economic productivity, recent employability literature extends this theory by recognizing communication competence, digital literacy, and language proficiency as strategic forms of human capital that increase graduates' competitiveness in knowledge-based economies (Tomlinson, 2021; van der Heijde & van der Heijden, 2023). From this perspective, English proficiency represents an intangible asset that enables graduates to access broader employment opportunities, perform effectively in multicultural workplaces, and adapt to rapidly changing labor market demands.

The present findings also align with the concept of graduate employability proposed by Succi and Canovi (2020), who argue that employability is shaped by the integration of knowledge, transferable skills, personal attributes, and adaptability rather than by disciplinary knowledge alone. Within this framework, English proficiency functions as a transferable skill that enhances graduates' ability to communicate, collaborate, and solve problems in diverse professional settings. Consequently, graduates possessing stronger English communication skills are more likely to demonstrate the competencies expected by employers in the digital economy.

Furthermore, these findings are consistent with the Future of Jobs Report published by the World Economic Forum (2025), which identifies communication, analytical thinking, technological literacy, resilience, and lifelong learning as the most essential competencies for

future employment. Since English remains the dominant language of global business and digital communication, English proficiency complements these competencies by enabling graduates to engage effectively in international collaboration, digital workplaces, and cross-cultural professional interactions. Therefore, English proficiency should be understood not only as a linguistic competence but also as a strategic employability capital that supports workforce competitiveness in the era of digital transformation.

English Proficiency Supports Workplace Communication

The second theme emerging from the reviewed literature highlights the significant role of English proficiency in facilitating effective workplace communication. Across the selected studies, English was consistently identified as the primary language for professional interaction, particularly in multinational corporations, international organizations, tourism, business services, and technology-based industries. Employees with higher levels of English proficiency demonstrated greater confidence in communicating with colleagues, clients, and business partners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These competencies contributed not only to smoother communication but also to improved teamwork, problem-solving, and organizational performance.

The reviewed studies further revealed that digital transformation has substantially changed communication practices in the workplace. Communication is no longer limited to face-to-face interactions but increasingly occurs through digital platforms such as virtual meetings, cloud-based collaboration systems, email correspondence, project management applications, and artificial intelligence-assisted communication tools. Consequently, employees are expected to possess adequate English proficiency to participate effectively in technology-mediated communication and international collaboration. Studies conducted in Malaysia and India reported that English communication skills significantly influenced employees' ability to work within multicultural teams, while research from Indonesia and Pakistan demonstrated that communication competence contributed positively to job performance and organizational effectiveness.

These findings are consistent with the concept of Communicative Competence, which emphasizes that effective communication involves not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to use language appropriately in different social and professional contexts (Celce-Murcia, 2022). Within contemporary workplaces, communicative competence extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include interactional skills, intercultural awareness, and professional discourse. Therefore, English proficiency should be understood as a practical communication competency that enables graduates to interact effectively in increasingly diverse working environments.

The findings also support the concept of Digital Employability, which argues that communication competence and digital literacy have become complementary competencies in the modern workplace (Ayoubi et al., 2023). Digital communication platforms require employees not only to operate technological tools but also to communicate clearly and professionally in English. Consequently, English proficiency enhances graduates' ability to collaborate within virtual teams, participate in international projects, and adapt to evolving communication practices associated with digital transformation. These findings reinforce the view that English communication skills have become indispensable for workplace effectiveness in the digital economy.

English Proficiency Facilitates Career Advancement

Another important theme identified in this review concerns the contribution of English proficiency to career advancement and long-term professional development. The reviewed studies consistently reported that employees with stronger English proficiency tend to experience greater

opportunities for promotion, salary progression, international assignments, and leadership responsibilities. Employers frequently regard English competence as an indicator of professionalism, adaptability, and readiness to participate in international business activities. Consequently, English proficiency contributes not only to initial employment but also to sustained career progression.

Evidence from Indonesia indicated that English proficiency increases graduates' confidence during recruitment interviews and supports their participation in professional training programs. Similarly, studies conducted in Malaysia and India found that employees possessing effective English communication skills were more likely to assume supervisory positions and engage in international collaborations. Research undertaken in Pakistan likewise demonstrated that English proficiency enhances professional credibility and facilitates access to broader career opportunities. These findings collectively suggest that English competence plays a strategic role throughout an individual's career rather than functioning solely as an entry-level qualification.

These findings can be interpreted through the perspective of Sustainable Employability, which emphasizes individuals' capacity to obtain, maintain, and continuously develop meaningful employment throughout changing career trajectories (Fleuren et al., 2020). Sustainable employability recognizes that long-term career success depends on continuous competence development, adaptability, and lifelong learning. Within this framework, English proficiency contributes to professional sustainability by enabling employees to respond effectively to organizational changes, technological innovation, and international collaboration.

Furthermore, the findings support the Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2021), which argues that career development is shaped by adaptability, personal resources, and the ability to respond to changing labor market conditions. English proficiency represents an important adaptive resource because it enables graduates to pursue international career opportunities, participate in global professional networks, and continuously develop their professional competencies. Therefore, English competence should be viewed as an important contributor to sustainable career development in the digital era.

English Proficiency Enhances Digital Workforce Readiness

The fourth theme identified in this review emphasizes the relationship between English proficiency and digital workforce readiness. The reviewed studies consistently indicated that digital transformation has expanded the role of English beyond traditional workplace communication. Employees are increasingly required to utilize English while operating digital platforms, artificial intelligence applications, online learning systems, cloud-based collaboration tools, and international professional networks. Consequently, graduates possessing stronger English proficiency demonstrate greater readiness to participate in digitally connected workplaces.

Several studies highlighted that English proficiency facilitates access to digital resources, professional information, technological documentation, and international knowledge-sharing platforms. Since most technological innovations, software interfaces, research publications, and AI-based applications are developed primarily in English, graduates with higher English competence experience fewer obstacles in utilizing emerging technologies. The reviewed studies therefore suggest that English proficiency enhances graduates' capacity to engage with digital technologies and continuously update their professional knowledge.

These findings are closely aligned with the concept of Digital Workforce Readiness, which defines workforce preparedness as the integration of digital competence, communication skills, critical thinking, collaboration, and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2023). Within this perspective, English proficiency functions as a complementary competency that supports graduates'

participation in digital workplaces and technology-driven industries. Language competence enables individuals to understand technical information, communicate effectively through digital platforms, and collaborate within international virtual teams.

The findings also support recent discussions concerning Future Skills, which emphasize that communication, digital literacy, adaptability, analytical thinking, and technological competence constitute the core competencies required in the future labor market (World Economic Forum, 2025). Consequently, English proficiency should not be considered an isolated language skill but rather an integral component of digital employability that enhances graduates' ability to compete in globally interconnected economies.

English Proficiency as a Barrier to Employment Opportunities

Despite the numerous positive contributions identified throughout the reviewed studies, the thematic analysis also revealed that inadequate English proficiency continues to function as a significant barrier to employment opportunities. Graduates with limited English competence frequently encounter difficulties during recruitment processes, workplace communication, professional networking, and career advancement. These challenges are particularly evident in multinational companies, technology-oriented industries, and organizations operating within international markets where English serves as the primary language of communication.

The reviewed studies consistently reported that insufficient English proficiency reduces graduates' confidence during job interviews, limits their participation in professional discussions, and restricts their ability to compete for internationally oriented positions. Several studies also highlighted disparities in access to quality English education, particularly among graduates from rural areas and institutions with limited educational resources. Consequently, unequal English proficiency contributes to differences in employability outcomes despite comparable technical qualifications.

These findings may be interpreted through Human Capital Theory, which suggests that disparities in educational investment and skill acquisition produce unequal labor market outcomes (Becker, 1964). Contemporary research further argues that language proficiency constitutes an important dimension of human capital because it influences productivity, communication effectiveness, and access to employment opportunities. Therefore, graduates possessing limited English proficiency may experience reduced competitiveness within increasingly globalized labor markets.

In addition, these findings support the concept of Social Inequality in Employability, which argues that unequal access to educational resources may reinforce labor market inequalities (Tomlinson, 2021). The findings also resonate with the concept of Digital Employability, which emphasizes that inadequate English proficiency may contribute to digital exclusion because graduates encounter greater difficulties accessing technological resources, online professional development, and international collaboration. Consequently, strengthening English language education within higher education institutions is essential for reducing employability disparities and ensuring that graduates are better prepared for the demands of the global digital economy.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative literature review synthesized recent empirical evidence on the role of English proficiency in shaping employability in the digital era. The findings indicate that English proficiency constitutes a strategic component of graduate employability by enhancing employment opportunities, workplace communication, career advancement, and digital workforce readiness. Conversely, limited English proficiency remains a significant constraint that

restricts graduates' access to internationally oriented and technology-driven labor markets. These findings reinforce the view that English proficiency extends beyond linguistic competence and represents an essential form of human capital within contemporary employment contexts.

Theoretically, this review advances the literature by integrating the perspectives of Human Capital Theory, Digital Employability, and Sustainable Employability to explain the strategic role of English proficiency in workforce competitiveness. Practically, the findings highlight the need for higher education institutions to strengthen employability-oriented English language education by integrating authentic workplace communication, digital literacy, and industry-relevant learning experiences. Such initiatives are expected to better prepare graduates for the evolving demands of the global digital economy.

This review is limited to empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025 and focused primarily on developing Asian countries. Future research is encouraged to incorporate broader geographical contexts and employ systematic review or meta-analysis approaches to further validate the relationship between English proficiency and employability across diverse labor market settings.

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