

Cultivating Job-Seeking Skills in Youth: Exploring Vietnamese EFL Learners' Experiences With the English for Employability Skills Program

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Abstract—This study examined the impact of a vocational English program on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' experience at University A in Vietnam. The research involved 20 participants and employed semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. The findings revealed that the program had a positive influence on participants' language and employability skills, as well as personal growth. Improved confidence, language proficiency, and various employability skills were reported among the participants. However, the study also identified the importance of addressing individual learning needs, optimizing resource utilization, and considering program duration. These findings make a valuable contribution to the existing literature on teaching English and developing employability skills in Vietnam, offering valuable insights into the effectiveness of English language training programs.

Index Terms—vocational English program, English learners, employability skills, Vietnam, EFL

I. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, English has emerged as a crucial mode of communication, particularly for employability opportunities. Therefore, possessing proficient English skills is not only an employer's requirement but also an essential quality for job-seekers across various sectors in the modern world.

There is considerable research focusing on highlighting the impacts of English language skills on employability opportunities and professional development (Huynh et al., 2023; Norton, 2018). Recognizing the importance of these skills, University A (pseudonym) implemented the EnglishWorks! program, aiming to enhance students' English language proficiency and necessary employability skills. The program is particularly relevant in the Vietnamese context, where proficiency in English is increasingly perceived as an essential factor for achieving success in the job market (Pham & Bui, 2019). The EnglishWorks! program provided at University A is distinct when compared with other foreign language training programs in the Vietnamese context. Traditionally, in Vietnam, the focus of English teaching has revolved around language skills and intercultural competence. However, very few English training programs have integrated employability skills into their English language curriculum (Tran et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, owing to the growing demand for English language proficiency in the job market, there has been a noticeable shift toward a more communicative and job-specific approach to English language instruction. Therefore, the

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implementation of the EnglishWorks! program at University A can be considered a pioneering effort in the transformation of English teaching approaches within the Vietnamese context.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of employability encompasses not only job attainment but also a spectrum of skills, knowledge, comprehension, and personality traits that enhance graduates' likelihood of acquiring and retaining jobs (Bridgstock, 2009; Tomlinson, 2012; Tran, 2017). Consequently, employability serves as a crucial metric for assessing an employee's proficiency (Tong & Gao, 2022).

Qualities such as problem-solving, management planning, and teamwork, viewed as employability skills, hinge on personal and interpersonal abilities (Tran et al., 2022). In essence, these traits correlate with language skills as they all necessitate some form of communication. Consequently, by adopting English language pedagogy, employability skills can be systematically incorporated into English language syllabi, particularly in higher education.

Moreover, Idkhan et al. (2021) asserted that employability skills can be fostered through strategies such as effective learning, student-centric teaching methods, lecture assignments, extracurricular activities, student-led initiatives, and industry-based practices. Unfortunately, a dearth of expertise and comprehension in the domain of employability skills and their acquisition through learning poses a challenge to their integration into the classroom (Fulgence, 2015). This underscores the importance of research that explores the effectiveness of an English as a foreign language (EFL) training program that integrates job-seeking skills, such as the EnglishWorks! program implemented at University A.

A. English Language Skills and Employability

A range of studies have highlighted the importance of English language skills for employability. Radwan (2023), and Zainuddin and Perera (2019) both emphasized the need for English language proficiency in securing employment. In addition, Zainuddin and Perera (2019) highlighted the importance of good grammar and vocabulary for employees to be successful in job seeking and professional development. Pešić (2022) also provided industry-specific perspectives focusing on the hotel industry.

In the Vietnamese context, various studies have highlighted the importance of English language skills and related challenges for employability. Pham (2019) emphasized the need for practical skills and English proficiency in the workplace, and Hoi (2020) observed that traditional teaching methods and a lack of interest in English among students are major challenges. Moreover, studies on the role of English competence in employability opportunities for Vietnamese job-seekers have emphasized the need for a more practical approach in English teaching instruction. In particular, researchers have called for the alignment between English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curricula and industry needs (Doan & Hamid, 2021). For instance, it has been asserted that English communication skills are crucial for employees in the hospitality industry (Nghia et al., 2022).

Such studies indicate that issues relating to teaching English language skills for employability should be addressed in terms of practicality. The findings from these studies also affirm that investing time and effort in improving English language proficiency is valuable for job-seekers, especially Vietnamese youth. Proficiency in English can contribute considerably to fostering the employability of young Vietnamese citizens and can open doors to numerous career opportunities. This also sheds light on the importance of English language education and training programs. Therefore, providing English language courses with a proper integration of employability skills in the curriculum seems to be an essential task for English language training programs, particularly in the Vietnamese context. By offering such opportunities, English language training programs can empower learners, especially job-seekers, to develop the necessary English skills and thus enhance their chances of success in the job market.

In summary, researchers have consistently proven the positive correlation between English language proficiency and employability. This emphasizes the need for individuals to invest in English language education and for institutions to offer proper training programs to support the young people who are seeking jobs.

B. Soft Skills and Employability

Soft skills are crucial for employability, particularly in the retail sector (Nickson et al., 2012). These skills are essential for entry-level jobs, complementing hard skills and guaranteeing job opportunities and career growth (Subedi, 2018). Leadership, teamwork, and communication skills are crucial for business graduates (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Employers value a combination of soft skills and academic qualifications (Asefer & Abidin, 2021), with a growing emphasis on soft skills in the last decade (Succi & Canovi, 2020). In the technology industry, communication skills, attitude, integrity, learnability, motivation, and teamwork are critical for employability (Fadhil et al., 2021).

In the Vietnamese context, several studies have highlighted the importance of soft skills in enhancing the employability of Vietnamese young people. Soft skills that are highly sought after by employers in Vietnam's tech industry include communication skills, teamwork skills, and presentation skills (Nghia, 2019). Employers in Vietnam have expressed that graduates often lack these soft skills, with a significant percentage rating them as relatively weak (Nghia, 2019). Studies have found that employers highly value technical skills in the technology infrastructure and service domain, along with strong communication and problem-solving qualities (Lau et al., 2016). Furthermore, Le Vo and Wyatt (2023) emphasized the need for these skills in the engineering and business sectors. Universities and vocational institutions

should prioritize the training of these soft skills to better equip students for the job market (Nghia, 2019; Nghia et al., 2022). By enhancing training in general skills and improving the learning abilities of students, institutions can contribute to inclusive skill development in Vietnam (Mori, 2023).

Furthermore, the findings from related studies have validated that along with having strong English language skills, to ensure job success, learners of English as a foreign language should be cultivated with employability skills. These skills go beyond language proficiency along with a range of abilities essential in the workplace. Recognizing the importance of these skills, the EnglishWorks! program has been designed to not only enhance English language proficiency but also foster the development of employability skills. The program acknowledges that language skills alone are insufficient for individuals to excel in their professional endeavors. Hence, it provides a comprehensive approach that encompasses the cultivation of both linguistic and job-seeking skills.

C. Theoretical Framework

One of the well-known theoretical frameworks for research on employability is the Employability Skills Framework (ESF). This framework was developed in 2012 (with funding from the U.S. Department of Education) to propose a set of employability skills that span the workforce development and education sectors. The framework components comprise nine key skills organized into three main categories: *Applied Knowledge*, *Effective Relationships*, and *Workplace Skills*. These essential skills encompass various areas, such as interpersonal skills, applied academic skills, critical thinking, resource management, information use, communication skills, system thinking, technology use, and personal qualities (see Figure 1). The framework emphasizes the importance of these competencies for individuals to be career-ready and to secure and maintain employment.

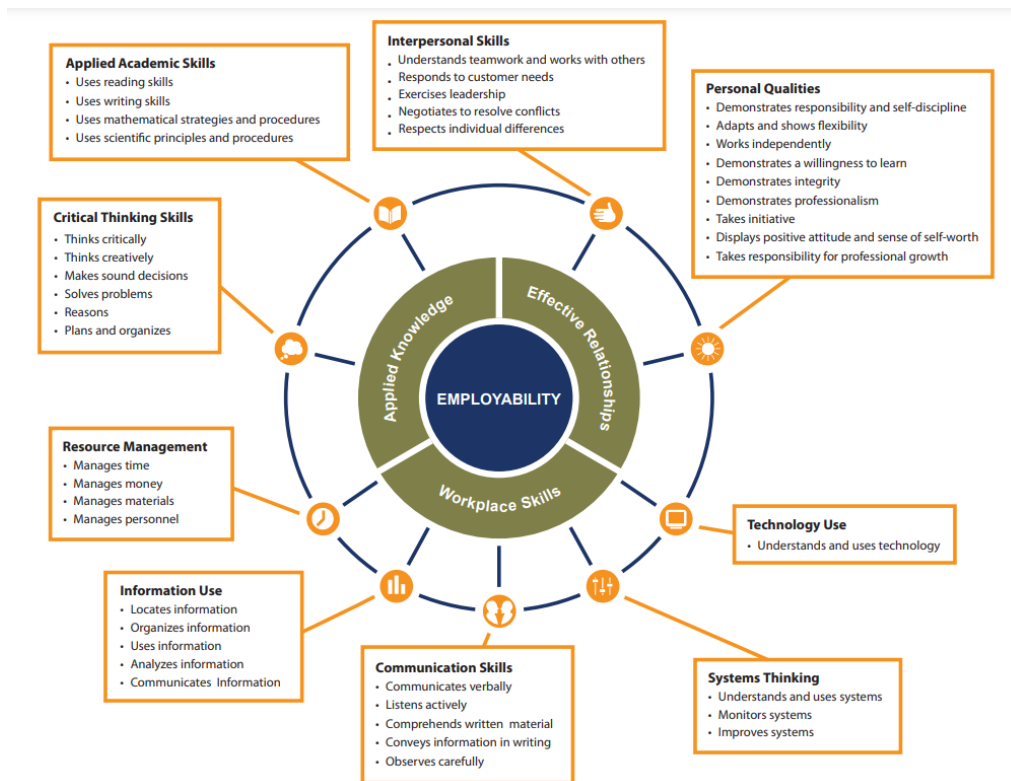


Figure 1. Employability Skills Framework
(Adopted from <http://cte.ed.gov/employabilityskills>)

Figure 1 shows that the ESF comprises nine subcategories that are essential for individuals to develop to be career-ready and succeed in the workforce. These subcategories of skills are (1) *Interpersonal Skills*, which are essential for effectively working in a team or independently; (2) *Applied Academic Skills*, including skills such as reading, writing, mathematical strategies and procedures, and scientific principles; (3) *Critical Thinking Skills*, which include the skills of analyzing information, engaging in logical reasoning, resolving problems, planning strategically, and prioritizing tasks; (4) *Resource Management Skills*, such as being capable of managing time and other accessible resources effectively; (5) *Information Use*, or the capacity to comprehend, evaluate, and utilize broad available information; (6) *Communication Skills*, namely, interacting and conversing with others verbally and non-verbally; (7) *System Thinking*, or the ability to execute tasks successfully by understanding the interconnections among the various components of a system; (8) *Technology Use*, that is, the capacity to complete job tasks successfully through the appropriate and efficient application of information technology; and (9) *Personal Qualities*, which include accountability, self-discipline, adaptability, ethical integrity, and initiative.

These components of the ESF provide a comprehensive framework for individuals to develop and demonstrate the crucial skills required for success in the modern workforce. The present study employs the ESF to develop interview questions for the purpose of exploring the experiences of the participants in a program that focuses on English and employability skills (i.e., EnglishWorks! program).

D. Overview of the EnglishWorks! Program

The EnglishWorks! provides un/underemployed young Vietnamese adults with training in basic vocational English, soft skills, and employability skills. The six-month program enables participants to build the professional skills necessary to compete in the 21st century job market. Learning activities include site visits and interactions with industry professionals, guest speakers, tech camps, and job fairs designed to enhance future employment opportunities. The expected outcome of the EnglishWorks! program was a diverse and empowered group of participants and alumni with an increased potential to shape the course of their own lives and their communities. In the academic year 2022–2023, a university (hereinafter University A) in Vietnam received financial support from the U.S. Department of State's English Access Microscholarship Program as one of the providers of the EnglishWorks! program in Vietnam. In line with the overall goals of the EnglishWorks! program in Vietnam, at University A, the program provided the local youth with basic English language skills, awareness of working requirements, and lifelong learning skills. The participants were expected to achieve an elementary level of English language, necessary life skills, and basic employability skills upon the completion of the program.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

The general objective of the present study is to explore the experiences of students participating in an English for employability skills program (the EnglishWorks! or RELO program) implemented at University A. The specific objective of the study is to gain insights into the experiences and perceptions of students participating in the program regarding the development of their English language skills and job opportunities after completing the program. Drawing from students' experiences, this study finds that the proposed teaching and learning activities, which are currently being implemented as a reference for similar programs or projects in the future, are considered effective for career-oriented English.

A. Research Questions

This study seeks answers to the following research questions.

1. What is the experience of students participating in the English for employability program with the program's content, including the development of English language skills, soft skills, and career orientation?
2. How do students participating in the English for employability program perceive the program's effectiveness in developing their English language skills and job-seeking skills?

B. Research Design

This research employs a qualitative research design, specifically employing the phenomenological approach—a qualitative research method that aims to understand the practical experiences of participants (Neubauer et al., 2019). The study utilizes this approach to explore the experiences of Vietnamese youth in learning English and developing skills for future job opportunities.

Regarding the data collection and analysis, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with students after they completed the 240-hour employability-oriented English language program. The interview data was recorded and transcribed. The semi-structured interviews explored the participants' experiences in the program, their perceptions of the program's effectiveness in developing English language and job-seeking skills, the challenges that they encountered while participating in the program, their attitudes, and their perceptions (in terms of strengths and weaknesses) of the program's content.

The interview questionnaire comprised three main sections. The first section asked for the participants' perspectives on the overall impact of the EnglishWorks! program on their English language skills. The second part of the questionnaire focused on exploring their experiences on the development of their employability skills (based on the ESF). The final part of the questionnaire aimed at assessing the overall effectiveness of the EnglishWorks! program and identifying its strengths and weaknesses. The participants were asked to evaluate the program's impact on their job-seeking skills, highlighting the aspects that they found particularly effective and providing suggestions on how to improve similar programs in the future. The responses of the participants were transcribed, translated (from Vietnamese into English) by lecturers competent in English, and analyzed thematically.

In total, the study included in-depth interviews with 20 participants who completed the EnglishWorks! program at University A. The participants were selected for interviews based on their willingness and availability upon their completion of the EnglishWorks! program at University A. The number of interviewees accounts for 80% of the total participants in the EnglishWorks! Program. Table 1 presents the backgrounds of the interviewees.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND

Participants	Gender	Age	English proficiency level
Participant 1	Female	17	Beginner
Participant 2	Male	18	Pre-intermediate
Participant 3	Female	17	Pre-intermediate
Participant 4	Male	26	Beginner
Participant 5	Female	20	Beginner
Participant 6	Female	19	Beginner
Participant 7	Male	25	Pre-intermediate
Participant 8	Male	22	Beginner
Participant 9	Male	25	Pre-intermediate
Participant 10	Female	21	Beginner
Participant 11	Male	24	Beginner
Participant 12	Male	21	Pre-intermediate
Participant 13	Female	21	Beginner
Participant 14	Male	25	Beginner
Participant 15	Female	24	Beginner
Participant 16	Male	23	Beginner
Participant 17	Female	23	Beginner
Participant 18	Male	20	Beginner
Participant 19	Male	22	Pre-intermediate
Participant 20	Male	25	Pre-intermediate

IV. FINDINGS

A. Overall Impact on Language Skills

Most participants reported considerable improvements in various language skills, such as speaking, listening, reading, vocabulary, pronunciation, and self-learning abilities. Some key areas of progress included confidence in communication, understanding of grammar, and interest in continuing English studies.

Specifically, Participant 1 noted a marked improvement in his language construction and vocabulary skills, reporting, "I can construct better sentences than before" and "I have increased my reflexes with English." Participant 2 lauded the unique learning approach of the EnglishWorks! program, stating the following:

It has a significant impact on my English learning because this program teaches in an easy-to-understand and comfortable way, making English more accessible. (Participant 2)

Participant 2 also acknowledged that the program's practical exercises for improving English language, which had a positive impact on his communication skills in English, particularly in everyday circumstances such as asking for or giving directions. Moreover, Participants 3 and 4 both emphasized the enhancement in their presentation skills due to the program. Participant 3 also stated the following: "I feel like I've learned a lot. First, it improved my teamwork skills ... and most recently, presentation skills," while Participant 4 shared the following:

Previously, I mainly focused on grammar and vocabulary. However, after participating in this program, I learned how to ... give presentations This has significantly improved my speaking abilities. (Participant 4)

Participants 5 and 6 echoed similar sentiments, highlighting improvements in their communication and listening skills. Specifically, Participant 5 indicated a substantial improvement in her English language skills after participating in the EnglishWorks! program. She particularly noted improvements in her communication skills, both spoken and written, as well as in her listening skills. She stated the following:

I can now communicate with others more confidently, both in speaking and writing. For example, in listening, I used to struggle with understanding, but now I feel I've improved by over 10%. (Participant 5)

Participant 7, an ethnic student learning English as an additional language, attributed his progress in speaking and listening skills to consistent class attendance, stating the following:

Yes, I do feel there has been some improvement. It has increased since I started attending. (Participant 7)

Similarly, Participants 8, 9, and 10, 18, and 20 noticed a marked improvement in their communication skills in English. Participant 9 shared the following: "After this program, it has improved my self-confidence, pronunciation, and communication skills in English." Participant 10 affirmed the following: "I can understand English conversations better now, and I can also speak more fluently and confidently." Moreover, Participant 11 believed that speaking activities (as in Figure 2) improved his English skills, particularly listening and speaking. He stated that these skills were crucial in his presentations at work. Participant 12 also recognized the program's impact on improving his English language abilities. He specifically noted how the program helped him understand the importance of starting from the basics in language learning. Further, he admitted to enhancing his presentation skills and vocabulary, despite not focusing much on the latter.

I think I have improved my English a bit ... I have improved my English presentation skills and vocabulary, even though I didn't focus much on learning vocabulary. I also learned English learning methods, such as learning the basics and prioritizing tasks. (Participant 12)

Participant 18, whose English proficiency was at a beginner level when participating in this program, expressed his overall improvement in English language skills.

After this program, my self-confidence, pronunciation, and communication skills have improved. It has also motivated me to engage in self-study and continue learning. Now, I am able to express my thoughts and feelings, such as expressing my desire to go out or to have something to eat. (Participant 18)

Participants 14 and 15 highlighted improvements in their listening, speaking, writing, and verbal expression skills. Notably, Participant 14's interest in English increased during the course, motivating him to continue studying in the future, as he believed that this would help him secure a better job.

My interest in English has increased since joining this course six months ago. I now have the motivation to continue studying English. If I have the opportunity to continue studying English in the future, I will definitely continue. (Participant 14)



Figure 2. EnglishWorks! Participants Engaging in Speaking Activities

In summary, the responses of the participants revealed a clear and positive impact on their English language skills. The personal experiences of the participants indicated the major role of the EnglishWorks! program in cultivating their job-seeking skills. During the interviews, the majority of the participants confirmed the improvement in their English language skills, overall confidence, and practical communication abilities. This indicates that the program's unique teaching methods, supportive learning environment, and emphasis on practical language usage made learning English an enriching experience. Accordingly, the program is a testament to effective language learning, equipping learners with not only linguistic proficiency but also the confidence and skills to engage in the global arena.

B. Employability Skills

The EnglishWorks! program yielded various benefits for its participants, particularly in enhancing their job-seeking skills and personal growth. Through in-depth interviews and reflective feedback, the participants conveyed valuable insights and experiences that underscore the program's positive impact on their journey toward career readiness. Here are the key themes and narratives that emerged from the participants' accounts.

(a). Interpersonal Skills, Personal Qualities, and Communication Skills

The emphasis of the EnglishWorks! program on developing interpersonal skills and personal qualities received positive responses from the participants. The majority of the participants reported a marked improvement in teamwork, leadership, adaptability, and other positive personal qualities.

Specifically, Participant 1 detailed how the program helped improve her interpersonal skills:

I experienced something like working in a group and improving the process of standing in front of a crowd and presenting our ideas. We also have additional skills to cultivate more leadership skills. (Participant 1)

Through the program, most of the participants developed their teamwork and leadership skills and became more adept at communicating effectively in English, both in daily life scenarios and professional environments. Participant 3 stated the following:

I feel more confident in group activities ... I'm comfortable speaking in front of everyone, and I can engage in discussions. The program enabled me to develop personal qualities like adaptability and patience because through group work, I've learned how to collaborate with others effectively. (Participant 3)

The majority of the participants reported substantial developments in their interpersonal skills and personal qualities as a result of the program's emphasis on teamwork and communication. The participants were particularly appreciative of the active engagement and unity fostered within the team activities, which not only improved their ability to work collaboratively but also enhanced their communication skills. Participant 4 noted, "I feel a sense of unity and active participation from all members in the group." Similarly, Participant 5 asserted that in addition to acquiring language skills, she also experienced an enhanced ability to work in a team as well as improved communication skills, particularly in terms of expressing ideas and engaging in discussions. This participant said the following:

The teachers taught us how to work effectively in a team and share responsibilities. I feel that my relationships with classmates strengthened, leading to a better interaction with and understanding of each other. We interacted more freely and got to know each other better outside of the classroom environment. (Participant 5)

Similarly, Participant 8 reported that he appreciated the program's contribution to his personal qualities. He learned soft skills and gained an awareness of his ability to share and connect with others:

What I learned from this is knowing how to share with everyone. Knowing how to love each other more. Connecting with each other more. To do homework together. (Participant 8)

Acknowledging that he struggled with confidence in communicating in English, particularly with foreigners, Participant 9 considered the program effective in improving his interpersonal skills and communication ability:

After interacting with the teachers and my peers, I have become more confident and can express my opinions. I really enjoy it now ... the program helped me build stronger relationships with my classmates and teachers and enhance my teamwork skills. (Participant 9)

More than half of the participants, particularly those whose English level was pre-intermediate (e.g., Participants 2, 3, 7, 9, 12, 19, and 20), asserted that their public speaking and presentation skills improved considerably after six months of participating in the EnglishWorks! program. These participants engaged in mock presentations, English speaking clubs, and group discussions and experienced a noticeable increase in confidence when communicating ideas and delivering presentations in English. For instance, Participants 3, 6, 8, and 20 made the following observations.

I feel more confident in group activities ... I'm comfortable speaking in front of everyone, and I can engage in discussions. (Participant 3)

The program's emphasis on public speaking helped me overcome my fear of presenting and improved my confidence in articulating ideas in front of an audience. (Participant 6)

My most specific feeling is that before I had the ability to present, I was only a very poor presenter ... My presentations are numerous; I have mastered the details and steps to have a perfect presentation. (Participant 8)

While participating in group activities such as ESC activities, I have had the opportunity to practice group leadership skills, leading to an improvement in my courage and confidence in public speaking, as evidenced by my active engagement in these organized activities. (Participant 20)

The above experiences can be considered evidence of personal growth and improvement in the presentation skills of the participants (Figure 3). This reveals a transformation from feeling inadequate as a presenter to gaining mastery and confidence in delivering presentations after completing the EnglishWorks! program.



Figure 3. EnglishWorks! Students Giving Presentations

From the responses of the participants, it can be observed that the program provided them with opportunities for group work, which helped them improve their communication and interpersonal skills. Moreover, the responses of the participants proved that the program played a key role in fostering a heightened sense of confidence and efficacy in their interpersonal interactions.

One notable case is that of Participant 14. Most of his classmates reported that he had not talked to them during the first three months of the program. However, in the second stage of the program, this participant became more open and started communicating with his classmates more, especially during classroom and field trips activities. In the interview, this participant remarked on his positive changes and how he communicated with classmates because of the EnglishWorks! program:

That's right, I'm more confident. I know I'm more confident than before. I was a bit shy and didn't talk to anyone much. However, after studying, I found I was closer to friends and talked more. (Participant 14)

When asked for the reasons, he first reported a notable improvement in his interpersonal and communication skills. He then stated that group work and peer interaction boosted his confidence, helped him learn from his classmates, and enhanced his speaking skills.

It helps me be more confident in communication ... I learned a lot from Tho, who is quite confident, and also from Tan, who always speaks up, whether right or wrong. (Participant 14)

The experience of Participant 14 indicates that the participants not only cultivated their interpersonal skills and personal qualities through the practical and meaningful content of the EnglishWorks! program but also developed their interpersonal skills and personal growth through various interactions with their classroom peers and through field trip activities—a unique feature of the EnglishWorks! program.

This sentiment resonated with several participants who acknowledged their increased confidence in communication. Participant 11, who worked a part-time job, acknowledged that his participation in the program considerably improved his confidence and communication skills. He also reported that he could confidently interact with foreigners visiting his company after the program, demonstrating his work, discussing his future plans, and explaining how these would benefit his customers.

In fact, all the participants asserted that field trip activities built closer relationships among their peers, enhancing their adaptability and comfort in communication and interaction. Moreover, the participants highlighted the program's role in fostering their motivation to study English and providing them with vision and inspiration for seeking rewarding employment opportunities. The participants emphasized the importance of field trip activities (Figure 4), during which they had the opportunity to visit real companies and workplaces and listen to employers sharing their requirements for prospective employees. This inspired and equipped them with the desire to study hard and obtain good jobs in the future. Participant 17 asserted: "My interest in English has grown significantly. I am now motivated to pursue further studies in English". Similarly, Participant 10 shared,

The program's diverse activities and projects prepared me to become familiar with different workplaces, especially for the field trip to the Duyen Hai Thermo Power Plant. This experience has been crucial in my plans for studying and seeking job. (Participant 10)



Figure 4. EnglishWorks! Students and Teachers Visiting the Thermo Power Plant

In summary, the participants' interpersonal skills, personal qualities, and communication skills were notably cultivated as a result of the EnglishWorks! program's targeted interventions and interactive curriculum. The participants cited a visible increase in their confidence in expressing their ideas, verbalizing their thoughts, and engaging in effective communication in English and Vietnamese with their peers and teachers. This underscores the program's success in equipping the participants with vital communication competencies essential for their future careers.

(b). *Technology Use*

The majority of the participants reported considerable improvements in their proficiency with office software, web development essentials, and professional applications, acknowledging the program's contribution in enhancing their technological literacy and adaptability for their studies and future careers. Specifically, the participants highlighted the program's supportive role in enhancing their technological literacy and proficiency. Participant 1 asserted,

Through the computer science course when participating in the EnglishWorks! program, I also know how to use technology to introduce myself like by creating a file or a business card for an email so that it can be polite and more beautiful. (Participant 1)

Similarly, Participant 3 acknowledged,

The teacher taught us the basics of office software like Word and Excel ... We also learned how to build a website, send emails, set schedules, and use tools in Google. (Participant 3)

The program's impact on the participants' acceptance of digital innovation and the enhancement of their online presence is encapsulated in the words of Participant 12:

... There were many useful features in tools like Google ... I found these skills very helpful for creating a more impressive online presence. (Participant 12)

Participant 13 highly valued the contribution of the program's information technology (IT) lessons, which were familiar and easy for her to understand, making them extremely practical and beneficial. In addition, Participant 13 noted that these IT skills were essential for job-seekers like her, particularly in terms of searching for information online and enhancing the visual appeal of her documents.

We learned about using tools and websites, selecting quality images, and formatting text. I find these skills quite beneficial for people looking for jobs or those currently using these tools to create CVs or edit documents. (Participant 13)

These experiences of the participants revealed that the program equipped the participants with up-to-date technological skills, thereby amplifying their readiness for employment opportunities. The participants also reflected on the guidance received in exploring new knowledge through the use of modern technology. Participants 7 and 8 disclosed the following:

The training in computer skills was very helpful, especially in video editing. I learned how to edit and put together videos, which I had never done before. (Participant 7)

That's the ability to create photos. Yes, that's cutting and erasing frames on Google ... as a search engine, you will know some good websites. (Participant 8)

Despite being an IT graduate, Participant 11 found that the program helped him improve his basic IT skills. This included learning how to create a survey on Google and how to send emails effectively.

The teacher guided [me] a lot. I saw that there was a lot of knowledge that I didn't have, hadn't learned ... about online. (Participant 11)

In conclusion, the qualitative insights from the participants unequivocally underscored the transformative impact of the EnglishWorks! program on their technology use. The program emerged as a catalyst for fostering enhanced technological literacy, digital innovation, and professional technological skills among individuals, thereby shaping an empowered and tech-savvy participant base poised for success in their future endeavors.

(c). Critical Thinking and Applied Academic Skills

Regarding critical thinking and applied academic skills, most of the participants highlighted the program's positive influence on fostering their critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making capabilities. The participants emphasized the program's role in cultivating independent reasoning, creative thinking, and collaborative problem-solving, resulting in a considerable enhancement of their academic and applied skills. Participant 3 disclosed the following:

The program's emphasis on practical problem-solving and group projects has sharpened my critical thinking and decision-making abilities, preparing me for real-world challenges in my chosen field. (Participant 3)

The participants acknowledged the program's profound impact on their critical thinking and independent reasoning abilities. Through engaging discussions and problem-based learning activities, the participants developed the capacity to evaluate information critically, analyze complex scenarios, and arrive at well-reasoned conclusions. Participant 7 emphasized the following:

The program challenged us to think critically and approach problems analytically. This has been instrumental in refining my ability to solve real-world challenges. (Participant 7)

In addition, the program's focus on creative thinking and innovative problem-solving techniques was a recurring theme in the participants' feedback. The participants shared their experiences of engaging in open-ended projects that encouraged original thought and imaginative solutions. Participants 9, 11, 17, and 19 observed the following:

The program encouraged us to think outside the box and approach challenges creatively. This mindset has become a valuable asset in my academic and professional pursuits. (Participant 9)

I really loved the activities, especially in the environmental protection project in which I and my friend pointed out the causes and proposed solutions for environmental pollution with our drawing. Then, we presented our products with other teams for competition. This was really fantastic. (Participant 11)

I really enjoyed the activities where the teacher assigned us a topic and we worked in groups to bring that topic to life through expression. For instance, one activity involved designing our dream house and then using English to describe it. This learning activity was very interesting and practical. (Participant 19)

Such experiences indicate the importance of collaborative learning activities and teamwork in the development of the participants' applied academic skills when participating in the program. In fact, the program's emphasis on group projects and team-based activities provided the participants with opportunities to practice their decision-making skills in a collaborative setting. Participant 16 recalled: "Each person will share their opinion, while others listen attentively. Subsequently, we will collate and consolidate these diverse viewpoints". Similarly, the program considerably aided Participant 4 in developing his critical thinking and applied academic skills. Activities that encouraged argumentative thinking and required independent reasoning fostered problem-solving abilities (Figure 5). Participant 4 explained the following:

Activities like teamwork and argumentative thinking, as well as homework assignments that required argumentative thinking, allowed us to think independently without necessarily aligning with the teacher's perspective. (Participant 4)

The participants' narratives underscore the EnglishWorks! program's multifaceted impact on their critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative decision-making skills, equipping them with a comprehensive toolkit for academic and professional success.



Figure 5. EnglishWorks! Students in a Drawing Competition

Furthermore, the program's approach to cultivating a problem-solving mindset and resilience in the face of challenges was a recurring theme in the participants' reflections. By engaging in complex problem-solving tasks and resilience-building activities, the participants developed the capacity to approach obstacles with a strategic and resilient outlook. Participant 11 stated the following:

When I communicate in class, I also learn a lot of skills in class, so it applies to my job. Research skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, time management skills, and work organization skills. (Participant 11)

C. Evaluation of the Program

(a). Strengths of the Program

As mentioned in the earlier sections, the overall strength of the EnglishWorks! program was its positive impact on language skills, employability, and personal qualities. In particular, the participants reported improved confidence, enhanced language proficiency, and a range of employability skills. In terms of specific comments, the participants appreciated the various strengths of the program, including the variety and effectiveness of teaching methods, practical skills and activities, and group work and collaboration.

When asked about the strength of the EnglishWorks! program, 5 out of the 20 participants (Participants 1, 7, 11, 15, and 16) appreciated the variety of teaching methods employed in the program and emphasized that the diverse approaches and highly qualified teachers enhanced their learning experience. Participant 1 shared her experience:

Each teacher has a different teaching method, so in those teachers' teaching, we will learn different skills. It's like getting different flavors in a dish, which makes it more interesting and enjoyable for us to learn. (Participant 1)

Similarly, Participant 11 highly valued the program's effectiveness and the diversity of its teachers. Each teacher had a different teaching approach, enriching the learning experience for him and his classmates:

One aspect that makes our course more effective is that there are many teachers teaching the class because each teacher will have a different way of teaching the core principles that that teacher wants to convey. (Participant 11)

Alongside the improvement in his language skills, Participant 7 appreciated the teachers' positive influences on his personal qualities. Specifically, he welcomed the teachers' guidance on ethics and life skills (such as meditation; see Figure 6). These shared experiences of the participants demonstrate the EnglishWorks! program's strength in terms of its focus on practical skills, the diversity of its teaching methods with highly qualified teachers, and its supportive learning environment.

In addition, one major point mentioned by a large majority of the participants of the EnglishWorks! program was group work and collaboration, which resulted in the improved presentation skills, confidence, and assertiveness of the participants. Participant 3 noted the following:

feel that I was improving my presentation skills, communication, and confidence by presenting in a group. Working together with others made me more assertive and better equipped to communicate effectively in professional settings. (Participant 3)

Participant 4 identified the program's core strength as its requirement for all the participants to engage actively in communication and presentation. He believed that the broad involvement and mandatory participation in team presentations were vital in fostering a collaborative environment and enhancing their public speaking skills:

The main strength is that it requires all students, every participant, to communicate and interact. Additionally, everyone has to give presentations, so it's not just for certain individuals. (Participant 4)

Participant 6 further confirmed the positive influence on her confidence:

This program gave me back my confidence. Now, I'm not as afraid to communicate in English as I used to be. (Participant 6)

Participant 9 viewed the program positively and was appreciative of the wide range of skills that he learned, including presentation and computer skills as well as improved English proficiency. He also enjoyed the variety of activities that the program offered.

The most valuable aspect for me was learning various skills from teachers, such as presentation skills [and] computer skills, [as well as] improving my English. I also enjoyed the activities during the program, as they inspired me and make learning less restrictive. (Participant 9)

Another major feature of the EnglishWorks! program was identified because most of the participants highlighted the practical skills and activities taught in the program, such as CV writing, email composition, and presentation skills. The participants found these skills beneficial for job hunting and personal development. When asked about the good features of the program, Participant 10 was appreciative of the program, particularly the CV writing aspect. She also found the extracurricular activities to be a unique advantage, enabling her to gain more knowledge about the outside world. Other participants also provided positive comments on the program for its practical applications, including the field trips and interactive social events. Specifically, Participant 5 highlighted the valuable practical skills offered by the program, including CV writing and email composition, which she believed would be beneficial for job seeking. She also valued the program's promotion of creativity and environmental awareness through painting activities.

In summary, the qualitative findings from the participants' feedback provide a comprehensive understanding of the EnglishWorks! program, highlighting its strengths in practical skill development and collaboration as well as its positive impact on language skills and employability.

(b). Weaknesses of the Program

In addition to the strengths, the participants also identified several areas for improvement in the EnglishWorks! program with respect to, for example, individual learning needs, facilities and resource utilization, and program duration and curriculum. Similarly, Participant 4 recommended stricter punctuality and attendance requirements, highlighting the importance of a disciplined learning environment:

In my opinion, there should be stricter attendance requirements. Punctuality and attendance should be emphasized more. Also, I suggest including more listening activities since it's an area that needs improvement. (Participant 4)

Participant 14 noted challenges when different teachers had overlapping schedules, affecting the logical connection between lessons. This signals the need for improved scheduling and coordination. These observations shed light on the importance of streamlining administrative processes and ensuring a cohesive learning experience for participants. In addition, Participants 9 and 10 both recommended incorporating more basics before advancing to complex topics:

I think there should be a more in-depth focus on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to improve pronunciation. He mentioned that while the program covers a vast range of topics, it could benefit from delving deeper into specific areas, like IPA. (Participant 9)

Several participants (such as Participants 1, 6, 8, and 18) also suggested the need for a more personalized approach based on the different levels of proficiency among students. These participants highlighted the importance of considering individual learning preferences, focusing on specific areas for improvement, and addressing the needs of learners to prepare for their future jobs. For instance, Participant 1 suggested a more personalized approach based on the different levels of proficiency among students, emphasizing the need for tailored instructions. These recommendations indicate the need for a more structured and progressive learning approach for future EnglishWorks! programs.

Another point for improvement mentioned by the participants of the EnglishWorks! program pertained to issues related to facilities, such as malfunctioning projectors and air conditioners. In addition, the utilization of learning resources, such as textbooks and online materials, raised concerns related to the depth of learning and continuity in skill development. Participant 7 expressed his concerns as follows:

Sometimes, we faced issues with the projectors and air conditioners, which affected our learning environment. Better facilities and resource utilization would enhance the overall learning experience. (Participant 7)

The above issue was also mentioned by Participant 11, who noted that the classroom facilities, specifically, the projector and air conditioner, occasionally malfunctioned. However, he did not perceive any weaknesses in the teachers' pedagogical approaches.

Of the 20 participants, four (Participants 5, 15, 16, and 20) suggested future EnglishWorks! programs should consider the duration both for lessons and the overall period of the program. These participants thought that an extension was needed for them to fully absorb and master the skills offered and indicated a desire for a longer learning period to allow for a more comprehensive learning experience. Participant 5 and 20 remarked,

I feel that the program duration is not enough for us to absorb all these skills. A longer duration would provide us with the time needed for a more in-depth and comprehensive learning experience. (Participant 5)

Most of my classmates said that it's okay to study longer, while others say it's too fast. At first, I thought that studying for 6 months would be too long, but it went by quickly. (Participant 20)

In summary, the EnglishWorks! program was evaluated by 20 participants, each providing valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Their feedback offers a qualitative understanding of the program's impact on language skills, employability, and personal development.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings reported in this study indicate that the EnglishWorks! program implemented at University A successfully impacted the participants' employability skills, personal growth, and learning experiences. By integrating the teaching of interpersonal skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities into an English language curriculum, the EnglishWorks! program equips learners with a well-rounded skill set.

Moreover, the EnglishWorks! program recognizes that employers increasingly value candidates who possess a combination of English language proficiency and employability skills. Employers seek individuals who can communicate effectively with colleagues and clients, think critically to solve complex problems, and adapt to the rapidly changing demands of a workplace. In comparison with related studies, the EnglishWorks! program appears to share similarities with other programs or studies that aim to enhance language skills and employability. These similarities may include a focus on practical skill development, collaboration, and the integration of technology skills (Le, 2020; Nghia, 2019; Tran et al., 2022).

However, the specific strengths and areas for improvement identified by the participants for the EnglishWorks! program may differ from those in related studies, as these aspects are based on the unique experiences and feedback of the participants in this particular program. Although there may be similarities in the broad goals and focus areas, the specific strengths, weaknesses, and impact of the EnglishWorks! program may differ from those observed in related studies.

For instance, one of the unique field trips of the EnglishWorks! program was to take the participants to a well-known Buddhist temple in Vietnam for the participants to be taught about morality and trained in meditation to help them control their mental faculties and emotions in real-life situations. This particular activity was highly appreciated by all the participants. This activity was particularly integrated into the EnglishWorks! program to teach English and employability skills and, at the same time, nurture personal growth in the Vietnamese context.

Although language skills are undoubtedly crucial, employability skills play an equally critical role in job success. The EnglishWorks! program recognizes this and strives to develop a holistic skill set in learners by integrating the teaching of both language and employability skills. The program's strengths, combined with constructive feedback, position it well in terms of maintaining continuous improvement and a positive impact on participants' employability and personal development.

In conclusion, this study offers insights into the real-time learning experiences of Vietnamese EFL learners who participated in a vocational English program. The findings from this study contribute to the field of teaching English and curricular development. However, one limitation of the present research is the lack of the perspectives from the teachers who participated in the program. Further research can explore the experiences of both student and teacher participants of programs that are similar to the EnglishWorks! program at University A. The findings of such investigations may offer more interesting and helpful experiences.

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