

Bridging the Employability Gap through Humanistic English Language Teaching: A Critical Review of Emotional Intelligence, Communication Competence, and Employability Development among Undergraduate Learners

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Abstract: Graduate employability has emerged as one of the most pressing concerns in higher education worldwide. While universities continue to produce graduates with disciplinary knowledge, employers increasingly report deficiencies in communication competence, emotional intelligence, adaptability, teamwork, and professional interaction. English Language Teaching (ELT), traditionally focused on linguistic competence and examination performance, has considerable potential to contribute to employability development; however, conventional ELT practices often neglect emotional intelligence, communication confidence, and workplace readiness. This paper critically reviews contemporary literature related to employability skills, emotional intelligence, communication competence, and Humanistic English Language Teaching, drawing on studies from applied linguistics, educational psychology, positive psychology, and employability research to examine the relationships among emotional intelligence, communication confidence, communication competence, and workplace readiness. The paper argues that Humanistic ELT provides a promising pedagogical framework capable of integrating affective development with communicative competence. The review identifies a significant research gap in the absence of integrated intervention models that systematically examine the pathway linking Humanistic ELT, emotional intelligence, communication confidence, communication competence, and employability skills among undergraduate learners. These findings establish the theoretical foundation for developing a Humanistic ELT Intervention Model aimed at enhancing employability skills in higher education contexts.

Keywords: Humanistic ELT; Employability Skills; Emotional Intelligence; Communication Competence; Communication Confidence; Higher Education; Graduate Employability

Introduction

The twenty-first century workplace has undergone profound transformation, and contemporary employers increasingly seek graduates who possess not only disciplinary expertise but also communication competence, emotional intelligence, adaptability, resilience, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving abilities. Consequently, employability has become a central concern within higher education institutions across the world.

Yorke [1] defines employability as a set of achievements, understandings, personal attributes, and skills that make graduates more likely to gain and succeed in employment. Similarly, Dacre Pool and Sewell [2] emphasise that employability integrates knowledge, skills, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and career development learning. Communication competence has emerged as one of the most sought-after graduate attributes, yet it is not merely linguistic: it is influenced by confidence, emotional regulation, and empathy, so emotional intelligence has gained increasing attention as a predictor of communication success.

English Language Teaching (ELT) occupies a unique position in employability development because language classrooms provide opportunities for interaction, self-expression, collaboration, and communication practice. Despite this potential, many ELT programmes remain dominated by grammar instruction and examination preparation, overlooking affective dimensions of learning that significantly influence communication behaviour and professional readiness.

The present review explores how Humanistic ELT can bridge this gap by integrating emotional intelligence, communication competence, and employability development, critically examining current literature to establish the need for an integrated pedagogical intervention capable of enhancing employability skills among undergraduate learners.

Related Work

Global Employability Crisis

Graduate employability has become a global challenge. Although access to higher education has expanded over the past two decades, employers continue to report dissatisfaction with graduate preparedness, and a growing mismatch exists between university learning outcomes and labour market expectations.

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report [3] identifies analytical thinking, resilience, flexibility, leadership, communication, emotional intelligence, creativity, and lifelong learning as among the most important workforce competencies for the coming decade, and estimates that approximately 39 per cent of existing workforce skills will undergo substantial transformation by 2030.

Table 1. Top Workforce Skills Identified by Global Employers (Source: Adapted from Future of Jobs Report 2025 [3])

Skill Category	Importance Level
Analytical Thinking	Very High
Communication	Very High
Emotional Intelligence	High
Adaptability	High
Lifelong Learning	High

Jackson [4] found that employers prioritise soft skills and interpersonal competence alongside academic qualifications, and Tomlinson [5] argues that employability increasingly depends upon graduates' ability to demonstrate personal attributes that facilitate workplace integration and career progression. The employability crisis is therefore not primarily a knowledge deficit but rather a competency deficit.

Graduate Employability in India and Malaysia

India produces millions of graduates annually, yet employability concerns remain substantial; communication skills, workplace readiness, critical thinking, and professional interaction continue to emerge as areas of concern [6]. The India Employment Report [7] similarly notes that educational expansion has not always translated into improved labour market outcomes, with employers frequently reporting deficiencies in communication competence, adaptability, teamwork, and professional behaviour among graduates.

Graduate Employability versus Graduate Output in India

Illustrative comparison highlighting the gap between annual graduate output and employability-related skill readiness.

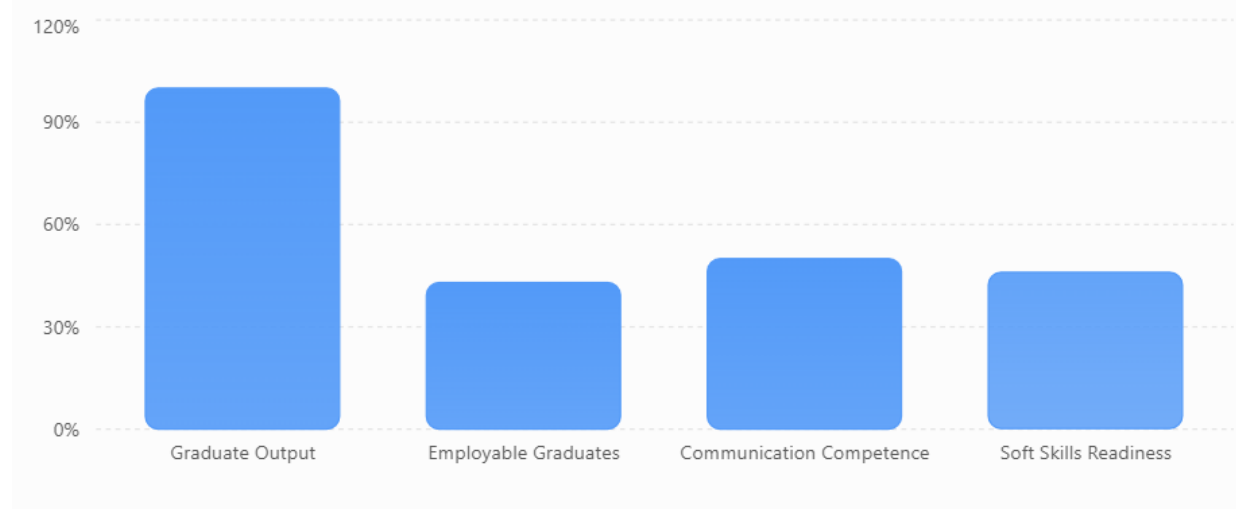


Figure 1. Discrepancy between educational attainment and workplace readiness in India [6].

Malaysian higher education has placed considerable emphasis on graduate employability and English proficiency; nevertheless, researchers continue to identify gaps in communication competence and soft skills among graduates. Both India and Malaysia therefore face a common challenge: translating academic knowledge into workplace performance.

ELT and Employability Development

English proficiency has become a critical component of employability within globalised labour markets, yet ELT has historically prioritised linguistic competence over communicative competence, emphasising grammar and examination performance rather than the skills modern workplaces require, such as presenting, collaborating, and communicating across cultures.

Canale and Swain's [8] model of communicative competence expanded language education beyond linguistic accuracy by incorporating sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies. Recent scholarship advocates for employability-oriented language education, arguing that classrooms can develop communication confidence, teamwork, and emotional intelligence, perspectives that align closely with Humanistic ELT.

Key Contribution

Existing research has generally examined emotional intelligence, communication competence, and employability independently. This review's key contribution is to synthesise these constructs into a single pathway, Humanistic ELT to emotional intelligence to communication confidence to communication competence to employability, and to identify gaps justifying an integrated Humanistic ELT Intervention Model for undergraduates in India and Malaysia.

Literature Review and Critical Synthesis

Emotional Intelligence and Communication Competence

Emotional intelligence gained prominence through Mayer and Salovey [9] and was later popularised by Goleman [10], who identified self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills as its five dimensions. Li [11] found that emotional intelligence significantly predicts learner engagement and language learning success; Wang, Zhu, and Dai [12] reported that self-regulation plays a crucial role in vocabulary acquisition; and Lei, Chen, and Luo [13] demonstrated that learning engagement mediates the relationship between motivation and educational effectiveness. Dewaele and MacIntyre [14] showed that positive emotions such as enjoyment increase classroom participation and willingness to communicate, whereas anxiety inhibits communication performance, and Resnik and Dewaele [15] found that teacher emotional support positively influences learner engagement. These findings indicate that communication competence is an emotional and psychological phenomenon, not merely a linguistic one.

Table 2. Major Findings from Emotional Intelligence Research

Study	Major Findings
Goleman [10]	EI predicts personal and professional success
Li [11]	EI predicts engagement and language learning success
Lei et al. [13]	Engagement mediates learning effectiveness
Wang et al. [12]	Self-regulation improves learning outcomes

Communication Confidence and Employability

MacIntyre et al. [16] proposed the concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC), describing an individual's readiness to initiate communication as a function of confidence, motivation, anxiety, personality, and situational factors. Peng and Woodrow [17] found that communication confidence significantly predicts willingness to communicate, and Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak [18] observed that willingness to communicate fluctuates according to emotional states and classroom climate. Communication confidence assumes particular importance in employability contexts, functioning as a psychological bridge between emotional intelligence and communication competence, though empirical studies examining this mediating role remain limited.

Yorke [1] and Dacre Pool and Sewell [2] frame employability as an integration of skills, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and career development learning. Jackson [4] reported that communication, teamwork, adaptability, and leadership are among the most highly valued graduate attributes, and the World Economic Forum [3] identifies communication, emotional intelligence, resilience, and collaboration as critical future workforce competencies. Nevertheless, few studies investigate how language classrooms might contribute directly to employability development, an important rationale for integrating employability outcomes into ELT pedagogy.

Humanistic ELT and Affective Learning

Carl Rogers [19] proposed that meaningful learning occurs when learners feel psychologically safe, respected, and valued, and Maslow [20] emphasised self-actualisation as the ultimate goal of human development. Moskowitz [21] pioneered humanistic techniques encouraging self-expression and empathy, and later scholars such as Stevick [22], Arnold [23], and Oxford [24] further emphasised affective variables in language learning. Humanistic ELT is characterised by learner-centredness, emotional safety, authentic communication, and collaborative learning, principles aligned closely with emotional intelligence and employability development. Dewaele and MacIntyre [14] demonstrated that enjoyment promotes engagement, suggesting that Humanistic ELT may develop emotional intelligence, communication confidence, competence, and employability simultaneously; however, empirical investigation of Humanistic ELT as an employability outcome remains limited.

Critical Synthesis of Literature

The literature reveals that emotional intelligence predicts learning success and communication behaviour; communication confidence mediates competence and performance; communication competence is a key employability attribute; and Humanistic ELT offers a coherent framework for affective, communicative, and developmental dimensions of learning. However, the literature remains fragmented, as most studies examine these constructs separately.

Discussions

Research Gap

The literature review identifies several significant gaps:

- Most EI studies focus on academic achievement rather than employability outcomes.
- Communication competence research rarely examines EI as a developmental mechanism.
- Willingness-to-communicate studies seldom extend to workplace communication and employability.
- Employability research identifies communication skills as important but rarely explains how to develop them through language education.
- Humanistic ELT studies focus on language learning or classroom interaction rather than employability.
- No study has examined the integrated pathway, Humanistic ELT to EI to Communication Confidence to Communication Competence to Employability, within one model.
- Cross-cultural evidence from India and Malaysia remains limited for employability-oriented language education.

Conceptual Framework

Humanistic ELT Intervention → Emotional Intelligence → Communication Confidence → Communication Competence → Employability Skills

The framework assumes that Humanistic ELT fosters emotional intelligence through reflective, learner-centred experiences; enhanced emotional intelligence builds communication confidence; and confidence promotes communication competence, which facilitates employability and workplace readiness.

Problem Statement

Existing research on emotional intelligence, communication competence, and employability remains fragmented, and traditional ELT continues to prioritise linguistic competence over affective and communicative development. There is therefore a need to develop and validate a Humanistic ELT Intervention Model for undergraduate learners in India and Malaysia.

Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals

The proposed research contributes to UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, by integrating emotional, communicative, and professional competencies into language learning, and Goal 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth, by developing employability skills for productive work.

Conclusions

1. Problem addressed: the contemporary employability crisis and the growing importance of communication competence, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal effectiveness, which traditional ELT approaches often fail to develop systematically.
2. Method used: a critical synthesis of literature across applied linguistics, educational psychology, positive psychology, and employability research.
3. Key findings: emotional intelligence influences communication behaviour, communication confidence facilitates communication performance, and communication competence contributes significantly to employability; Humanistic ELT provides a theoretically robust framework for integrating these dimensions.

4. Limitations and future work: the review remains conceptual, and empirical investigation of the complete pathway from Humanistic ELT to employability development is needed, together with development and validation of a Humanistic ELT Intervention Model among undergraduate learners in India and Malaysia.

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