

EXPLORING JOB INTERVIEW SKILLS OF FUTURE ENGINEERS: APPLICATION OF APPRAISAL ANALYSIS ASSESSMENT AND VERBAL IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The issue of employability among engineering graduates has been examined, debated and tried to be resolved by various organizations and researchers. The lack of employability skills especially communication skills causes graduates struggling to fulfill current work demands and professional expectations in order to succeed in today's fast-changing and global working environments. Communication skills are a crucial factor of employability, thus there is a need for quality assessment especially in job interview to enhance communicative competence of undergraduates. This research aims to unfold and assess what and how job candidates perform in a mock job interview and how they are being judged by the interviewers. It also studies the underlying linguistic evidence in job interviews of future engineers under the conditions of English as a Second Language (ESL) by applying Appraisal analysis (Attitude subsystems) of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Verbal Impression Management. The findings revealed that future graduates who possess certain elements of linguistics competencies are better in answering and some are in dire need to be equipped with the skills of job interview in preparing them to be employable. It can be concluded that good communication skills especially the job interview skills as what the industry required and persisted are not only based on the fluency of English but the ability to present ideas explicitly and facts using appropriate words and positiveness. The study also recommends the need to assess the future engineering graduates' linguistics abilities in preparing them to be employable.

Keywords: *Job interview assessment, employability, systemic functional linguistics, appraisal analysis, future engineers*

1. INTRODUCTION

Statistically, engineering graduates have higher employability than social sciences graduates as stated by Weinstein (2012). However, as Malaysia is shifting to an industry and a serviced based economy, the employability rates of engineering graduates is still low compared to other countries. It is inevitable that employers worldwide want/require well-rounded graduates who possess discipline-specific knowledge and skills (hard skills), desired soft skills such as communication skills and preferably relevant work experience (typically attained through internship or part time jobs) (Ahmad & Munian, 2010). In surviving the volatile global market, employers began to find new approaches to recruit new engineers such as stringent entry level during job interview for employment by demanding emotional quotients exams and group interviews to select the best new engineers. Engineering graduates are required to possess the employability skills to help them practise their knowledge and technical skills effectively and become competitive among them (Mohammad, Nor, Omar, & Mohamed, 2004; Zaharim, Ahmad, Yusoff, Omar, & Basri, 2012). This study aims to discover how entry level future engineers and job interviewers (as the appraised and the appraisers) in a mock job interview perform their roles. Thus, a thorough investigation can be performed later to recommend a suitable syllabus in facilitating students to attend job interviews. Apart from that, not many studies attempted to probe into what really happens in the job interview especially in the non-native setting like Malaysia where English is the language for employment in many companies. Therefore this study is hoped to fill the gap in assessing job interviews especially for future engineers.

New graduates these days are facing more challenges and competition compared to previous peers. The lack of employability skills make them struggle to fulfill current work demands and professional expectations in order to succeed in today's fast-changing and global working environments (Bakar & Hanafi, 2007; Hamid, Islam, & Manaf, 2013). This is related to the tracer study conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education (2010) where there are more than 10% of unemployed graduates who had attended more than 5 times of job interviews. Several studies have been done on graduate employability skills which focus on the causes of graduates' unemployment. One of the significant features of unemployment relates not to academic ability but to inability to communicate well. Therefore, the lack of soft skills especially communication skills in English has contributed greatly to unemployment and difficulties in securing a first job. Some of the elements that have been identified as significant that reflect soft skills include appearance, dress code, motivation, communicative ability, flexibility, positive, gesture, mannerism and resourcefulness (Devins & Hogarth, 2005; Newton & Kusmierczyk, 2011) .

"Education and experience might get you a foot in the door, but without soft skills such as leadership ability, self-motivation, communication skills and time management, there is likely to be a limit to how successful you are in selling your ideas to others, working as part of a team and demonstrating your potential for bigger roles."(Tims, 2011, p.33)

2. INVESTIGATING JOB INTERVIEW PERFORMANCE

The issue of fast changing global environment of engineers and communication skills have also been emphasized by Einstein (2002) and Lee (2003) who both conducted their study in the United States and Australia respectively in the early years of the issue. They concluded that due to the changing demands in the engineering world, graduates need to possess

communication skills too. Riemer (2002) has also emphasized the importance of communication skills for engineers in order to penetrate the global market. Another interesting study was conducted by Gilleard & Gilleard (2002) in Hong Kong where the current situation resembles Malaysia. Engineering graduates are facing problems in communication when they communicate in English as the second language.

One of the earliest frameworks on the correlation between the job interview and employability was done by Hopper and Williams (1973) between employers' attitudes toward speech samples and their hiring decisions with regard to the speakers. Other studies had also suggested that judgments are made between intelligence and speech competence as employers regard intelligence and competence based on the English proficiency during the communication of the job candidates (Alias, Sidhu, & Fook, 2013b; Bye, 2011; Hall, Gradt, Goetz, & Musu-Gillette, 2011). There are also earlier studies signifying that interviews offer job applicants the opportunity to manage impressions and communication skills because both the interviewer and applicants are attempting to fit the needs of the other (Godfrey, Jones, & Lord, 1986; Lockwood, 2012). A graduate possesses appropriate soft skills and interpersonal skills may get hired after the interview since many future employers can identify the weakness in soft-skills during the screening process such as interviews (Bye, 2011). There are more other studies that support the relationship between speech styles, speech characteristics, verbal actions in job interview and employability (Campbell & Roberts, 2007; Deprez-Sims & Morris, 2010; Lockwood, 2012). Feiler and Powell (2016), on the other hand revealed how assertiveness and impersonally warm interview candidates can overcome nervousness thus creating positive impressions towards the interviewers.

Nonetheless, so far none has been conducted in the Malaysian setting to investigate the linguistics performance of the job interviews relating to employability yet. Most of the study conducted in the local setting covers on the perception of employers (Chung-Khain & Lim, 2009; Husain, Mokhtar, Ahmad, & Mustapha, 2010; Jusoh, Simun, & Chong, 2011), job market and gender (Ghavifekr, Jani, & Kenayathulla, 2016), graduates perception (Alias, Sidhu, & Fook, 2013a), graduates attributes and lecturers competencies (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014). On the other hand, a study on the linguistics elements applying certain linguistics framework has not been conducted yet in the Malaysian setting. Therefore, the study undertaken intends to fill the gap in assessing the underlying linguistic evidence in job interviews of future engineers in Malaysia under the conditions of English as a Second Language (ESL) by applying the framework of Appraisal analysis of Systemic Functional Linguistics.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The current study aims at investigating the significant gaps in a mock job interview assessment conducted in the Malaysian settings where the issues of graduate unemployment are still at large after the implementation of soft skills module. It aims to identify how the job interview candidates present themselves verbally in creating good impression to the interviewers and how the interviewers assess the interviewees. Interpersonal assessment in the study of linguistics is still at the nascent stage in Malaysia which has encouraged researchers to study more of job interviews in other fields. However, the framework Appraisal Analysis which is derived from the Systemic Functional Linguistics developed by Halliday (1985) conjures more linguistics elements of interpersonal meaning than any other sociolinguistics models to be applied in the study of job interview. One of the prominent studies applying appraisal analysis on job interview was conducted by Lipovsky (2006, 2008)

on the performance of job candidates in job interviews. She advocated that the appraisal analysis revealed how candidates connect to, and align with, their interviewers referring to their passion for the job and how candidates encouraged their interviewers to empathize with their feelings.

2.2 Appraisal Analysis from Systemic Functional Linguistics

The complexity of interpersonal as *'one of the least understood and most under-researched areas in linguistics is the domain concerned with interpersonal assessment'* (Eggins & Slade, 1997:124). The interpersonal metafunction has a network system for evaluative meaning which is called the appraisal systems. According to Martin and White (2005) appraisal is one of the elements interpersonal language concerns with *'how speakers approve and disapprove, enthuse and abhor, applaud and criticize and how the position their listeners to do likewise'* (p.1). Job interview linguistics analysis is most suitable to adopt the appraisal analysis since it evaluates the attitude of the speakers as according to Posthuma (2002), an interview serves as a social interaction between job candidates and the interviewers consisting of 'talk' as the central evidence upon hiring a candidate. Consequently, it is crucial to assess how candidates present themselves verbally during a job interview through the use of Appraisal analysis. Martin and White (2005) pioneered the system and placed appraisal as an interpersonal system at discourse semantics level together with negotiation and involvement. For example, a successful job interview candidate are those *'who successfully negotiate their expertise then volunteer sufficient information that is both explicit and relevant, and use appropriate technical terms'* (Lipovsky, 2006: p.33)

Appraisal is a system which evaluates the lexico-grammar of the language functions and distinguishes between types of **attitude** (personal affect, appreciation of objects and judgement of people), **graduation** focuses on how language functions to amplify or diminish attitude and engagement represented by a text and **engagement** considers the positioning of oneself with respects to the opinions of others. For the purpose of the paper only the attitude subsystem will be focused due to the extensive and rich data collected to be studied.

2.2.1 Appreciation

It concerned with the different ways things are evaluated including manmade objects, performances and natural phenomena. Since appreciation lexis encodes descriptive evaluation of things, the realization of these meanings is through adjectives, for example, lovely/horrible, excellent/weak. But, Appreciation meaning can also be realized through nominalization where we can change descriptive into objects or things, as adverbs where attitudinal meanings can be relocated to describe how actions and events were achieved and as verbs where descriptive meanings can also be encoded through the predicator (Eggins & Slade, 1997). The three types of appreciation may be considered as levels in a cline of sophistication: **reaction** being instinctive appreciation, **composition** being perceptive appreciation and **valuation** being cognitive appreciation (Martin & White, 2005). Attitude sub-system (Figure 1) consists of the following elements.

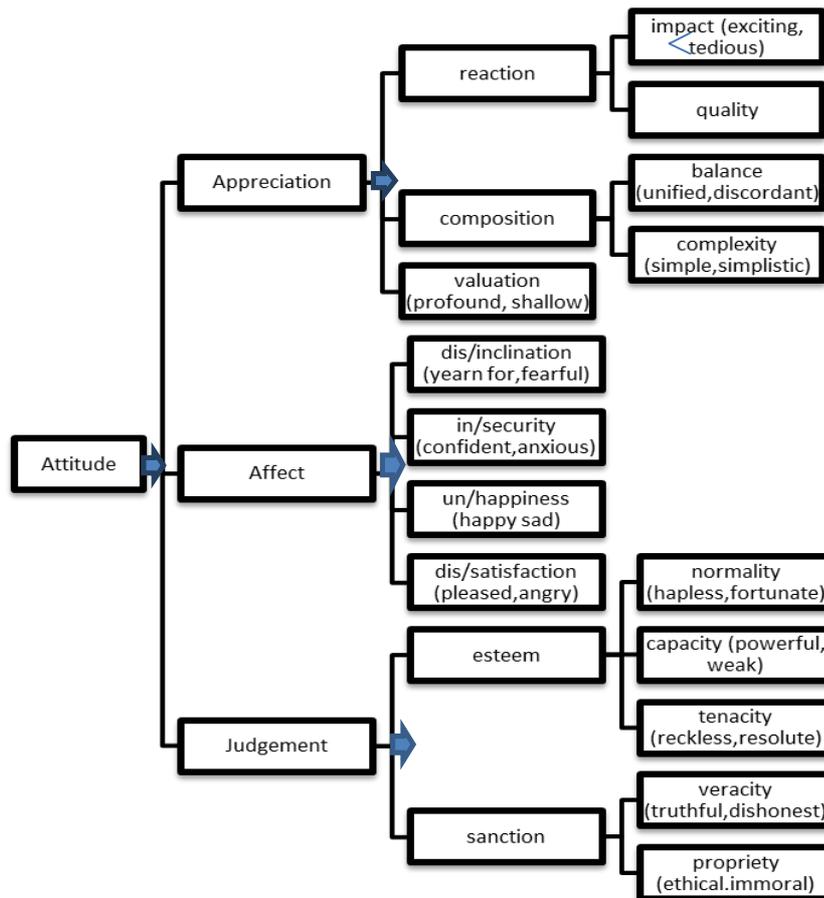


Figure 1: The subsystem of Appraisal (Martin & White, 2005)

2.2.2 Affect

Describes personal emotion. There are four subclasses of Affect : inclination is concerned with items that express some degree of personal desire towards or against phenomena (e.g. miss, long for, yearn versus wary, fearful, terrorized); terms of happiness deal with internal mood (e.g. cheerful, like, jubilant versus sad, dejected, joyless); security covers the social well-being and one's environmental (e.g. confident, assured, trusting versus uneasy, anxious, startled); and satisfaction is expressed with one's goals (e.g. pleased, thrilled, involved versus jaded, angry, bored)(Martin & White, 2005). Affect is best applied in analyzing the emotional response of job candidates especially when candidates are asked about their final projects and co-curricular activities.

2.2.3 Judgement

concerns with evaluation of people and is divided into Esteem and Sanction: Judgement of sanction deals with veracity; the honesty of a person (e.g. truthful, frank, and discrete versus dishonest, deceptive, blunt) or propriety that shows how well a person's ethics match the culture (e.g. good, fair, polite versus bad, unfair, rude). Judgement of esteem consists of capacity (the capability of a person, e.g. powerful, witty, successful versus mild, dull, unsuccessful), normality (a person's behaviour compared with what the culture considers normal, e.g. lucky, normal, fashionable versus unlucky, odd, dated) and tenacity (the

dependability of a person, e.g. plucky, reliable, faithful versus timid, unreliable, unfaithful)(Martin & White, 2005)

The appraisal systems consist of negative and positive evaluation aspects. The negative and positive evaluation enable us to describe positive and negative feelings, behaviour or reactions to people and objects and also enables us to describe negotiations and solidarity that exists between two speakers (Martin & Rose, 2007). Apart from negative and positive aspects, the appraisal systems also consist of invoked and inscribed. However, for the purpose of the study only the negative and positive sub-system will be analyzed since it presents the preliminary findings only.

In the case of job interview, for example, how the job candidate say and what they utter during the process will produce another appraisal by the interviewers and how the interviewers respond to the answers given by the novice job interviewees. In a job interview, a candidate might express his feelings through his word 'I'm nervous' will reflect the negative affect. However, 'I am independent and reliable' is a positive judgement. Butt et al (2009) stated that if the 'colour or flavor of the text is too strong, the audience may interpret the text as being emotional, judgemental or critical' (p. 212). Thus, the lexico-grammatical resources, for creating and interpreting appraisal and attitude, are important tools in the exploration of text thus creating impressions to the hearer or reader of the text.

2.3 Verbal impression management

Job interviews serve as turning points for most job position candidates as they determine whether a candidate is capable of being hired. There has been considerable research in Impression Management tactics as they can be studied in various forms (Huffcutt, 2011). Impression management (IM) tactics have been defined as 'behavior individual employ to protect their self-images, influence the way they perceived by significant others, or both' (Liden, Martin, & Parsons, 1993). According to Goffman (2003) Impression Management serves as self-presentation of us to the world. When entering employment interview, applicants usually own the motivation to engage in Impression Management. It is crucial that managing the social influence or one's impressions in specific context where either social influence or conformity is important. In this study, other than assessing job interview performance using the appraisal analysis, it is also relevant to analyze it using verbal impression management in order to identify how the respondents apply the verbal impression management during the job interview. For the purpose of the study, Mc Farland's adaptation from) verbal impression management will be utilized (Table 2). The discourse analysis will also aim to discover verbal impression management tactics as whether it can be found in the simulated job interview.

A study by Huffcutt (2011) in the field of social psychology expanded the definition of the verbal impression management tactics of job interviewees. He divided the verbal impression management into 'other' focused where candidates purposely agree with the interviewee and/or praise them or the organization; 'self' focused which is self-promotion where candidates take credit for successes that are not entirely of their own doing and in general portray themselves as hardworking, competent, and effective; defensive tactics where candidates explaining away negative event and tactics which comprise outward faking that candidates created an event or an accomplishment.

Table 2: Verbal Impression Management Focus Source: McFarland(2003)

Tactic	Definition
Other focused tactics	
Other enhancement	The praising of another person. Being complimentary to the interviewers or the organizations
Opinion conformity	Expressions of beliefs, values or attitudes that are known or that can be reasonably assumed to be held by the target or target organization
Self –focused tactics	
Self- promotion	Description of the candidate that demonstrates the possession of desirable qualities (i.e. competence, reliability)
Entitlements	Claims of responsibility for positive events made by the candidate
Enhancements	Claims that the value of a positive event for which the candidate was responsible were greater than most people might think
Overcoming obstacles	Descriptions of how the candidate circumvented problems or barriers impeding progress toward goal. Candidate must demonstrate that a barrier was present that could reasonably have hindered progress
Basking in reflected glory	Enhancing one’s image by claiming association with prestige figure or prestigious institutions
Personal stories	Descriptions of specific past events or actions such as recounting the details of a group interaction or one’s work experiences in particular instances

3. METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS

The study was conducted in a Malaysian public university where the simulated job interview was conducted during a program done for graduating students in enhancing employability skills. It is a qualitative study with the researcher acting as a non-participant observer whereby the process of job interviews was solely prepared by the specific institution. Twenty one respondents volunteered to be videotaped. The interviewers were from three well-known companies who also have given consent for the purpose of teaching and learning. A job interview took 12- 20 minutes per interview session depending on the company jurisdiction. The structure and questions of the interview were solely under the discretion on the specific company since the study adopted the exploratory approach. The program was arranged by the Students Development Centre of a particular university. Each job interview is transcribed and analyzed using Appraisal Analysis (Martin & White, 2005) and Verbal Impression Management framework (McFarland, 2003). This section will present the overview findings of the Appraisal Analysis and Verbal Impression Management as tools in assessing job interview performance of engineering graduates

This paper only presents the findings based from the Appraisal Analysis and Verbal Impression Management. After all the interviews had been conducted, the interviewers from the industry were also asked on which job candidates were successful and unsuccessful. Table 3 shows that only 3 candidates were successful from the preliminary 6 job interviews.

Table 3: Distribution of candidates and Companies

Candidates	Company	Successful/unsuccessful
J	A	Successful
A	A	Unsuccessful
N	B	Successful
S	B	Unsuccessful
C	C	Unsuccessful
F	C	Successful

3.1 Appraisal analysis

Based on the feedback from the interviewers, the transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed by applying appraisal analysis. Table 4 shows the three sub-systems of appraisals made by the job candidates.

Table 4: Appraisal made by the candidates

Candidate	Appreciation (-/+) 	Affect (-/+) 	Judgement (-/+) 	Total
J	7(+), 4(-)	8(+), 4(-)	16(+), 7(-)	46
A	3(+), 2(-)	9(+), 3(-)	5 (+), 6(-)	28
N	9(+), 1(-)	6(+), 1(-)	10(+)	27
S	2(+),3(-)	1(+)	3(+)	9
C	5(+),1(-)	7(-)	-	13
A	6(+), 1(-)	7(+),2(-)	7(+)	23

Successful job interviewees were able to promote themselves verbally and used more positive evaluative language during the interview. They were also able to supply explicit information expected by the interviewers. For example:

J: During my practical training, **I assist the engineer** (+Judg: veracity) to make sure the **work is done perfectly** (+ Appr: Val)

N: **I work hard** for the project (+ Judg; Cap)

N: I like to work in R N D department (+Aff; Sat)

On the other hand, unsuccessful job candidate provided negative evaluation on themselves, for example,

A: before that...I didn't get a aa proper job (-Aff; Sat) because aa I don't have the time to [pause] attend interview (-Judg; Cap)

The finding also reveals that **Appreciation** in the attitude of appraisal analysis represents more on the evaluation of the final projects or co-curricular activities. Meanwhile, **Affect** deals with the feelings in attitude of the speakers and it represents the job interviewee eagerness and credibility in presenting their ideas effectively. Moreover, **Judgement** is found as an evaluation of behaviour of the speaker or a person who is being discussed. It can also be seen that successful job interviewees utilized more positive evaluative language during the interview. Those who are successful also produced less negative evaluation language. Positive words such as ‘assist’, ‘make sure’, ‘good’ and ‘promote’ were used by successful candidates. Meanwhile, the unsuccessful one used less evaluative language when describing their credentials.

There were some unsuccessful job candidates who requested to answer in Bahasa Malaysia, which were forbidden by the interviewers.

In terms of appraisal made by the interviewers, patterns can also be seen that the interviewers evaluated the job candidates during the interview as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Appraisals made by the interviewers

Candidate	Appreciation (-/+)	Affect (-/+)	Judgement (-/+)	Total	Invitation to appraise
J	-	1(+)	1(-)	2	12
A	2(+),1(-)	-	3(+),2(-)	8	29
N	3(+),3(-)	-	4(+),1(-)	11	45
S	1(+),3(-)	-	2(+),10(-)	16	25
C	2(-)	1(-)	9, 8(-)	20	13
A	-	-	10(+),3(-)	13	15

The main intention of the study was to assess the attitude based on appraisal analysis used by both the speakers in creating interpersonal meaning. However, new discovery were unfold in the findings of the job interview. For example, questions asked to the job interviewees are more on invitation to appraise on the behalf of interviewers. Questions asked by the interviewers are to encourage the interviewees to give more information and to probe on their capabilities in the workplace later. The candidates' response in answering the questions is used by the interviewers to evaluate the candidates' ability in exhibiting specific knowledge as required by the company. This correlates with the study done by Scheuer (2001) and Lipovsky (2008) who stated that volubility of candidates response influenced the interviewers impressions on them. If the responses satisfied the interviewers then positive evaluation would be given.

Examples of invitation to appraise questions

1. Tell me about yourself
2. Is your project only a simulation?
3. What are your strong points?
4. Can you tell us more on your final project?

Through questions which invite appraisals, the interviewers simultaneously assess the interviewees' performance in the turn taking during the interview. Below is an excerpt on how the interviewer asks questions as the invitation to appraise.

- 3 Interviewer 1: so you're majoring in power, you're in final year student right?
 4 Candidate N: yes
 5 Interviewer 2: so what's your dream job?
 6 Candidate N: my dream job is... engineer as an engineer because of..that aa..
 7 Interviewer 1: what kind of engineer?
 9 Candidate N: in R and D engineering in research and development because..aa
 11 Interviewer 1: R and D is still general. Can you describe more?

Invitation to appraise by the interviewer 1 on candidate N is more on encouragement for the candidate to describe more on the course she is undertaking. Candidate N has never attended any job interview before therefore, more questions were asked as reinforcement. On the other hand, correlation also occur between the amount of invitation to appraise and negative appraisal made by the interviewers, based on the results, interviewers who gave less invitation to appraise and less positive appraisal lead to unsuccessful job interview.

3.2 Verbal impression management.

The entire job candidates are novice in attending job interview but they somehow subconsciously applied the verbal impression management. Only a few verbal impression managements were identified (Table 6) during the interview and these verbal impression managements were only being utilized fully by successful job interviewees.

Table 6: Verbal Impression Management tactics in numbers

Tactic	J	A	N	S	C	A
Other focused tactics	1					
Other enhancement						2
Opinion conformity						
Self –focused tactics						
Self- promotion	4		2			
Entitlements	5	2	6			2
Enhancements	6	2	5	2		4
Overcoming obstacles			2		1	2
Basking in reflected glory						
Personal stories						

The findings revealed that even though some respondents are placed in pairs for a job interview, they still did not fully utilize the verbal impression management in creating positive impression towards the interviewers. Only one respondent used other focused tactics during the interview while most candidates prefer to use ‘enhancements’ in creating positive impressions. Examples of enhancements during the job interview include:

- (i) My final project has been completed earlier
- (ii) I am the vice president of....
- (iii) It is my advantage to now more on computer...

It is interesting that not many respondents were able to self-promote except for two persons who claimed that:

- (i) I am to work independently but I can also work in team
- (ii) I am punctual.
- (iii) I work hard

In short, verbal impression tactics are not fully utilized by the candidates in the study and needs to be expanded among the candidates going for job interviews.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings presented here is only part of the preliminary findings from a bigger research. Moreover, the study conducted has its limitation in terms of number of respondents, the linguistics aspects of the interview and consents from the engineering industry since not many companies do not allow real job interviews to be video recorded. It is hoped that in future more industry would give their accord for education purposes. The analysis of the job interview is limited to verbal language; perhaps non-verbal communication comprises of multimodality approach will also be analyzed in the future studies. A successful job interviewee is able to present him/herself verbally using more positive evaluative language

and able to answer questions by giving appropriate information as expected. There were a few interviewees requested to speak Malay but some were denied while some were permitted. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that good communication skills as what the industry required and persisted are not only based on the fluency of English but the ability to present ideas explicitly and facts using appropriate words and positiveness. Undoubtedly, assessment on unsuccessful job interview consist lots of fillers, unconfident and negative words in evaluating and appreciating the objects of discussion that include their final project and co-curricular activities.

The term ‘selling yourself’ during the job interview should be taken seriously by job seekers in Malaysia as novice job seekers are unaware that first impression in the gatekeeping encounters is crucial in determining employability. It would be beneficial if more oral presentation skills could be inculcated especially in schools to encourage students to be more vocal and confident in presenting ideas.

5. RECOMMENDATION

There should be more studies to evaluate the verbal communication using Systemic Functional linguistics and Verbal Impression Management especially for job interview to encourage a specific plan for syllabus or curriculum to facilitate graduates in attending job interviews. As communication skills in English are crucial in determining employability, there is a need to plan a specific assessment as to evaluate the sorts of communication skills required by the industry.

More exploratory study on job interview such as this study should be conducted in facilitating more future research on the assessment of oral communication skills. Due to limitation of getting real job interviews, it is also hoped that more industry would volunteer to participate in the exploratory study of gate keeping encounters in the Malaysian setting.

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