

Bridging the Skills Gap: English Language Communication as a Tool for Improving TVET Graduate Employability

Abebaw Andargie Melaku (PhD)

Department of English Language and Literature, College of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Debre Markos University, Debre Markos, Ethiopia

 0000-0001-7845-7973

Corresponding author email: abebawandargie@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The increasing complexity of the global labor market has increased the value of employability skills over and above technical skills in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Although the government of Ethiopia has continued to invest in expanding TVET, the unemployment and underemployment of graduates is a serious problem, and English language communication is often identified as a competency that is less developed among graduates. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between English communication skills and employability among Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates in Ethiopia. To this end, a convergent mixed-methods design was employed, combining qualitative data from 35 TVET instructors and 25 employers with quantitative data from 210 TVET graduates. Descriptive data showed that students' performance in four language skills was moderate; writing ($M = 2.95$) and speaking ($M = 3.12$) were the weaker skills in comparison to reading and listening. Correlation analysis showed a strong positive relationship between English communication skills and employability ($r = .68, p < .01$) and multiple regression analysis indicated that the English communication skills significantly accounted for the variance in employability ($R^2 = .54, \beta = .62, p < .001$). These were confirmed by qualitative findings, which emphasized gaps in curriculum, instruction and industry linkages. The study findings support the need for strengthening English communication skills through curriculum reform, ESP integration, and industry involvement in Ethiopian TVET in order to overcome the gap in English communication skills and make the employees ready for the job market.

KEYWORDS

TVET;
Employability;
Communication
;Ethiopia; skills
gap; ESP

1. Introduction

Globalization and technological advances have significantly influenced the nature of the global labor market and the skills required to secure employment. Employability is no longer viewed solely as a technical ability; rather, contemporary workplaces require a combination of cognitive, social, and communication skills (Yorke, 2006). Among these competencies, English language communication has become one of the most essential skills over the past three decades, as it serves as a medium of communication for international business, science, and technology worldwide (Suhaili et al., 2024). Moreover, English communication skills have

consistently been ranked among the top five employability skills demanded in global reviews over the past 30 years (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023).

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has gained momentum as an important means of enhancing work readiness and contributing to economic development in Ethiopia. Recent policy reforms have placed greater emphasis on aligning TVET institutions with industry needs (Kebede et al., 2024). Despite policy attention and institutional expansion, a significant number of TVET graduates remain unemployed or underemployed, partly due to a mismatch between the skills acquired through TVET programs and labor market requirements (Melesse et al., 2023; Woldesemayat, 2023). Evidence from Ethiopian universities also indicates that twenty-first-century skills, including communication skills, remain insufficiently developed among both teachers and trainees (Molla, 2023).

English communication skills are particularly important in the Ethiopian context, where technical manuals, workplace interactions, and professional communication are commonly conducted in English. Previous studies have shown that TVET graduates often demonstrate limited English language proficiency, particularly in productive skills such as speaking and writing, which may hinder their ability to communicate effectively during job interviews, in workplace settings, and for professional development (Woret & Hailu, 2024).

Therefore, this study aims to identify the role of English language communication skills in enhancing the employability of TVET graduates based on empirical evidence to inform curriculum reform and policy interventions.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

While the Ethiopian government has made significant efforts to expand access to TVET for human capital development and industrialization, the transition from TVET to stable employment remains low. Although other skills, such as technical skills, are considered adequate, employers have repeatedly identified communication and other soft skills as major gaps among newly graduated TVET students, as revealed by national assessments (Mutembei et al., 2024; Woldesemayat, 2023). This mismatch has direct implications: graduates with limited English communication skills are less likely to succeed in job interviews, prepare workplace documents, participate in technical discussions, and secure employment opportunities. Consequently, they may take longer to obtain employment and may not fully realize the expected benefits of government investment in expanding TVET.

A curricular gap further exacerbates this challenge. Traditionally, Ethiopian TVET programs have emphasized occupational and technical skills while allocating relatively limited instructional time to English for Specific Purposes (ESP), resulting in general rather than occupation-specific language skills (Chettiar & Godwin, 2024; Worret & Hailu, 2024). Although the benefits of integrating ESP into vocational programs to facilitate students' transition into employment are well established in the international literature (Hartini et al., 2025; Warman et al., 2024), empirical research examining the relationship between English communication skills and employment outcomes among vocational graduates, instructors, and employers remains limited.

This gap is both theoretical and practical. Without robust evidence regarding the extent to which communication skills influence employability, curriculum reform efforts remain insufficiently grounded in empirical evidence. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by employing a convergent mixed-methods design to investigate the relationship between English communication skills and employability outcomes, the predictive contribution of these skills, and the instructional factors that hinder effective language training and explain the existing gap among TVET graduates.

1.2 Research Objectives

The overall aim of this study is to explore the contribution of English language communication skills to the employability of TVET graduates. In particular, the study aimed to:

- (1) Assess the level of English language communication skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) among TVET graduates.
- (2) Examine the relationship between English language communication skills and employability outcomes of TVET graduates.
- (3) Determine the extent to which English communication skills predict employability outcomes relative to industry exposure.
- (4) Explore the instructional and structural challenges that instructors and employers identify in integrating English communication training within TVET curricula.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Employability

The concept of employability has been viewed from multiple perspectives, as it is a multidimensional construct in which job readiness and job retention depend on skills, knowledge, and personal attributes (Yorke, 2006). Within this context, communication skills are consistently identified as a key component of employability, enabling individuals to apply and transfer technical knowledge effectively in workplace settings (Ali et al., 2025). A semi-systematic review of 30 years of employability research conducted by Tushar and Sooraksa (2023) identified communication, problem-solving, and teamwork as among the most frequently reported skills demanded by employers over time, alongside emerging competencies related to technology.

English language proficiency, in particular, plays a significant role in enhancing employability in a globalized economy. Individuals with strong English communication skills have demonstrated higher levels of job satisfaction, adaptability, and career advancement (Suhaili et al., 2024). English skills are particularly important in technical occupations for accessing instructional materials, facilitating workplace communication, and participating in activities related to international standards.

In the Ethiopian TVET context, several studies have identified challenges related to communication skills development. Woldesemayat (2023) observed that TVET programs often prioritize technical skills while giving limited attention to soft skills, resulting in a mismatch between graduates' acquired competencies and employer expectations. Similarly, Melesse et al. (2023) highlighted gaps in communication and interpersonal skills that hinder

graduates' work readiness, while Kebede et al. (2024) emphasized the need for stronger institution–industry linkages to ensure that curricula, including communication and interpersonal skills training, are aligned with industry requirements. At the institutional level, Molla (2023) noted that some teachers themselves lack adequate twenty-first-century skills, particularly communication skills, limiting their capacity to model and develop these competencies among trainees.

Furthermore, Woret and Hailu (2024) found that limited English language proficiency is a major challenge among TVET trainees, largely due to inadequate opportunities for practical English use and insufficient support for occupational language development. This highlights the need for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction that focuses on workplace-related language use (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Evidence from other contexts demonstrates that ESP education, which integrates occupation-specific vocabulary, discourse, and communication skills into curriculum content, enhances workforce readiness (Chettiar & Godwin, 2024). A systematic review of ESP in higher education also indicates that targeted ESP instruction improves graduates' employment readiness (Warman et al., 2024). Similarly, a broader systematic review of factors influencing vocational students' employability skills found that communication competence is consistently emphasized across countries, alongside curriculum design and industry exposure (Hartini et al., 2025). In addition, Mutembei et al. (2024) demonstrated that the availability of teaching and learning resources in Kenyan TVET programs directly influences the development of employability skills, including communication competence.

The existing literature indicates that enhanced English communication skills are essential for improving employability, particularly in contexts such as Ethiopian TVET, where both technical and soft skills are increasingly demanded. However, the integration of specific language development into TVET programs remains inconsistent.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The findings in this study are based on the Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993) and the Employability Skills Framework (Yorke, 2006), which support the argument that skills development is a key determinant of labor market outcomes. Human Capital Theory views language and communication skills as assets to be invested in to enhance productivity, thus raising the value of the individual in the labor market, while the Employability Skills Framework sees communication as one of a set of interacting soft skills, together with teamwork and problem solving, that complement and supplement technical skills.

2.3. Conceptual Framework

In this study, English language communication skills (speaking, writing, listening, reading) were operationalized as independent variables, workplace readiness and job access competencies (e.g., interview performance, CV writing) as mediating variables, and employability outcome (job placement, performance, and retention) as the dependent variable, and the sequence of the variables was as follows: English language communication skills (speaking, writing, listening, reading) → workplace readiness and job access competencies (e.g., interview performance, CV writing) → employability outcome (job

placement, performance, and retention). The model also assumes that job access competencies are an intermediary variable, and as a result, it proposes the relationship between English communication skills and employability in a way that is explicit, testable, and consistent with the regression-based analytic strategy used in this study.

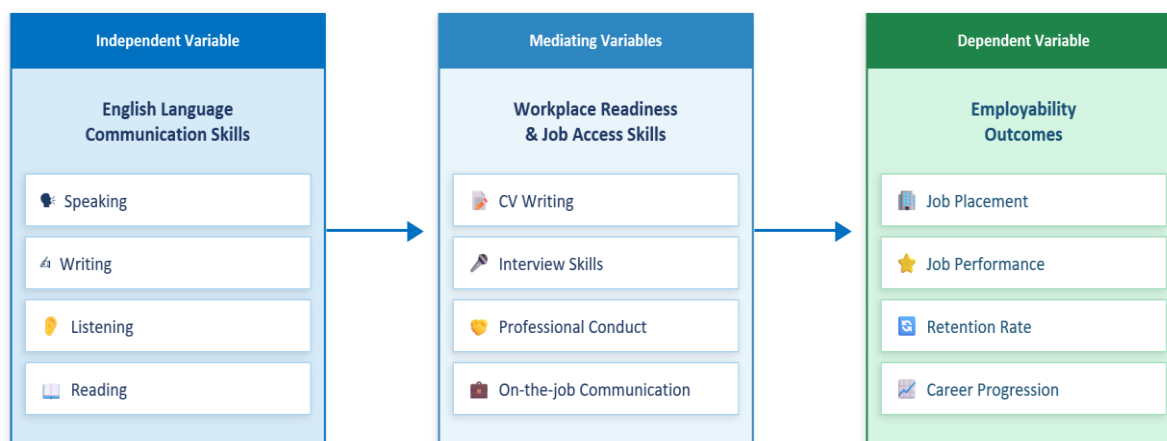


Fig.1. Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study used a convergent mixed methods research design, which involves using both quantitative and qualitative methods in one study at the same time to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

3.2. Population and Sampling

The study population of 270 participants was selected from the TVET institutions in the Amhara Region. Stratified random sampling was used to select a total of 210 graduates, ensuring representation across all fields of study. Furthermore, 35 teachers and 25 employers were purposively selected for qualitative interviews due to their expertise and direct experience with the research phenomenon.

3.3. Instruments and Data Collection

A structured questionnaire and semi-structured interview guides were used to gather the data. English communication skills and employability were measured using a five-point Likert scale in the questionnaire. The instrument was pretested before the data collection, and Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.87$) was used to determine the instrument's reliability, which showed high internal consistency. Content validity was established through expert review, and construct validity was determined by performing factor analysis.

3.4. Variables and Data Analysis

English communication skills were the independent variable, and employability was the dependent variable, with gender, field of study and previous work experience as control variables. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. The data were

summarized in descriptive statistics, relationships between variables were identified through Pearson correlation analysis, and the predictive effect of communication skills on employability was identified by multiple regression analysis. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data was carried out from the interviews conducted with the instructors and employers to support and enhance the quantitative results.

4. Results of the study

The findings of this study present findings on the relationship between English language communication skills and the employability of TVET graduates in Ethiopia. The results are presented in descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis and interpreted for each table.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 below shows that the general score of the respondents' English language communication skills is moderate. Specifically, the mean scores show that reading skills ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.76$) and listening skills ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.79$) are relatively stronger compared to speaking ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.84$) and writing skills ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.88$). The lower scores for writing indicate that participants may have a higher level of difficulty when asked to put their ideas into writing, which could impact their preparedness for writing reports, business emails, and other written correspondence. The average mark for speaking also suggests that there is some lack of confidence and fluency in the ability to speak, which is important for interviews and at work. The overall employability score ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.82$) is also at a moderate level, indicating that graduates have some employability skills, but not enough to impress the labor market. This suggests that although TVET graduates have basic skills in English, there is a great need for them to enhance their skills, especially in the language's productive skills.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
English Speaking Skill	210	3.12	0.84
English Writing Skill	210	2.95	0.88
English Listening Skill	210	3.28	0.79
English Reading Skill	210	3.45	0.76
Employability Score	210	3.05	0.82

4.2. Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis is presented in Table 2, which further investigates the correlation between English communication skills and employability. Results show that the two variables have a strong positive correlation ($r = .68$, $p < .01$). This suggests that there is a link between levels of English language competency and levels of employability. From a job perspective, graduates with stronger English proficiency will be better positioned to work, communicate with co-workers and supervisors, and be successful in the job application

process. This correlation is strong, indicating that communication skills are essential to employment outcomes and not merely an add-on to technical skills.

Table 2. Correlation between English Communication Skills and Employability

Variable	1	2
1. English Communication	1	
2. Employability	.68**	1

Note. $p < .01$

4.3. Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to further investigate the English communication skills' predictive value, and the results are shown in Table 3. The results confirm that employability is strongly predicted by English communication skills, with a statistically significant β value of .62 and a p value $< .001$. For each one-unit increase in English communication skills, employability scores increased by 0.62 units ($B = 0.62$, $p < .001$). The model explained 54% of the variance in employability ($R^2 = .54$), a relatively high value for social science research. This indicates that communication skills of communication are also important criteria for the employability of TVET graduates in the industry, aside from industry exposure.

Further, between industry exposure and employability ($\beta = .19$, $p < .05$), suggesting that industry exposure also contributes to employment outcomes, but to a lesser extent than communication skills. These findings emphasize the need for experience, but also that while workplace exposure contributes to employability, communication competence is the stronger predictor. The overall model is significant ($F(2, 207) = 121.6$, $p < .001$), indicating that the variability in employability is sufficiently explained by the predictors in the model.

The findings from the three tables (Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3) show a consistent picture that the skills in English language communication are critical factors affecting the employability of TVET graduates. The moderate levels of proficiency in descriptive statistics with a strong degree of correlation and significant predictive effect indicate that communication skills could have a significant impact on improving the employment prospects of graduates. These results support the hypothesis that communication skill gaps in education are a key obstacle to the education-labor market mismatch in Ethiopia.

Qualitative results confirmed these findings: employers reported that communication skills are essential in both recruiting and on-the-job performance, whereas instructors reported that current curricula are not meeting the needs in terms of language skills; they noted that there is a shortage of time to cover the language skills and a lack of appropriate resources. The combined findings indicate that the employability of the students in the TVET system relies on the importance of their English communication skills and suggest areas of improvement in the TVET system.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Employability

Predictor Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.85	0.31	—	2.74	.007
English Communication Skills	0.62	0.08	.62	7.75	.000
Industry Exposure	0.21	0.09	.19	2.33	.021

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.54$; $F(2, 207) = 121.6$, $p < .001$

5. Discussion

The results of this study offer strong empirical evidence on the relationship between the employability of TVET graduates in Ethiopia and their communication skills in English. The predictive association found in regression analysis ($\beta = .62$, $p < .001$) indicates that communication skills are not simply supportive of technical skills, but are actually an integral part of workforce readiness. This predictive effect empirically confirms Human Capital Theory because it serves as evidence that communication skills are assets which can boost productivity; within this theory, English communication skills can be seen as a kind of transferable human capital which can make graduates more competitive in the local and international job markets.

The findings also support the Employability Skills Framework, which highlights the importance of the soft skills (communication, teamwork and problem-solving) in addition to the technical skills, for successful employment (Yorke, 2006). The high level of correlation found in this study reaffirms the proposition by Suhaili et al. (2024) that communication is essential to the successful utilization of technical knowledge in the workplace, as those employees who show better English proficiency have better job performance, adaptability and career progression.

Furthermore, the results can be interpreted through the lens of Communicative Competence Theory, which emphasizes not only the knowledge of language but also the ability to use language appropriately in the social and professional context (Hymes, 1972). The relatively lower performance of TVET learners in speaking and writing skills indicates that there is a difference between grammatical competence and communicative competence, which in turn affects the effectiveness of the TVET graduates in communicating in the workplace, particularly during meetings, writing reports, and communicating with clients.

The results of the present study are also consistent with the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Theory, which suggests that language training should be based on the needs of the learners in a specific context or field of work (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). The fragmented integration of ESP in the Ethiopian TVET curricula is consistent with international research showing that occupational language instruction, in comparison to a general English curriculum, is more effective in preparing vocational students for the workplace (Chettiar & Godwin, 2024; Warman et al., 2024). Consequently, graduates can have a basic level of English, but may not have the specific communication skills needed for their chosen careers, consistent with existing studies that indicate general English language instruction is

insufficient to equip students with the professional language skills necessary for their respective fields (Woret & Hailu, 2024).

Moreover, the results can be interpreted through the lens of the Signaling Theory, which argues that education and skill are signals to the employer about a worker's productive capacity (Spence, 1973). The practical application of English communication skills is that it is an important sign of professionalism, skill and suitability for the workplace. In this context, employers often use good communication skills as an indicator of other skills like critical thinking and interpersonal effectiveness. Limited communication skills, therefore, could be a disadvantage to graduates in recruitment, even if they possess good technical skills.

The qualitative results also underscore the importance of institutional and structural conditions in determining the employability outcomes. The gaps reported in curriculum design, instructional practice and industry linkage are typical systemic issues in the TVET system, which can be explained through the theory of skills mismatch, which is an understanding of the gap between skills provided by educational institutions and skills required by the labor market (McGuinness et al., 2018). This mismatch is especially stark in Ethiopia, as evidenced by the lack of communication skills development, which also leads to a lack of teaching-learning materials for other employability skills (Mutembei et al., 2024). The fact that teachers may need better training in twenty-first-century skills before they can adequately teach them (Molla, 2023).

Finally, the study highlights the importance of a socio-cultural approach to skill development that recognizes the critical role of social interaction and context in the development of skills (Vygotsky, 1978). There is little opportunity for real-world communication practice in TVET programs, and the students' language skills may not be fully functional, which indicates that the language-learning environment should be made to resemble the workplace context as much as possible, and students need to be trained in both language and social skills. In general, the study brings together the theories of Human Capital Theory, Employability Skills Framework, Communicative Competence theory, ESP theory, Signaling theory and skills mismatch theory, and thus offers a holistic view of the influence of English language communication skills on employment outcomes, suggesting that addressing the skills gap in Ethiopian TVET requires a comprehensive approach that combines language and technical training, industry relevance and practice-based learning.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the contribution of English language ability to the employability of TVET graduates in Ethiopia. The results indicate that graduates' proficiency in English communication is moderate, and that while writing and speaking are less well developed than reading and listening, English communication is strongly and positively related to their employment outcomes ($r = .68$), and it significantly predicts employment outcomes ($\beta = .62$, $p < .001$), accounting for more than half of the variance in employment outcomes along with industry exposure. Qualitative evidence gathered from the instructors and employers corroborates these patterns and identifies gaps in the curriculum, instruction and industry linkage as drivers. Combined, the findings indicate that technical skills alone are insufficient; English communication competence is central to the employability of TVET graduates in

Ethiopia. The identified skills gap can be narrowed through aligned curriculum development, teaching and learning approaches, and industry linkages, and it has a direct link to the TVET strategy's objectives of preparing the workforce for employment and making them economically competitive.

7. Recommendations

From the results and conclusions presented in this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. TVET institutions should integrate English for Specific Purposes (ESP) modules aligned with specific occupational fields (e.g., construction, ICT, manufacturing), accompanied by learner-centered pedagogies that emphasize active communication, such as role plays, simulations, and project-based learning.
2. Capacity building programs should be offered for instructors to help them integrate language and technical instruction and equip them with the skills and materials needed to teach language in occupational contexts.
3. TVET institutions should strengthen partnerships with industry to align training with labor market needs and provide structured opportunities for students to practice communication skills in real workplace settings.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Further Research

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. Methodologically, the cross-sectional, non-experimental design is not suited for causal inferences; the study demonstrates a strong predictive association, but they do not imply that there is a causal link between communication skills and employability improvements. In the context of the study, the sample was taken only from TVET institutions in the Amhara region, which might not necessarily represent the other regions of Ethiopia, where the labor market and institutional structures might be different. Also, the English communication skills were assessed using self-reported Likert-scale items rather than standardized, independently administered proficiency tests, which may introduce response bias. For future studies, longitudinal and/or quasi-experimental designs are recommended that follow up graduates over time to examine the outcomes of different ESP interventions or that use standardized English proficiency tests in addition to self-reports to assess outcomes of ESP interventions, and that expand data collection to multiple zones/regions to facilitate cross-sectoral comparisons of different aspects of the Ethiopian TVET system.

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