Using a Simulated Employer Project to Enhance Student Employability Skills in a Tertiary Level Language Course

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Abstract

Recent reports highlighted that new graduates are still not meeting the expertise requirements of the industry, and with the increased use of AI tools, such as ChatGPT, there are also growing concerns that tertiary level students' development of their knowledge and skills may be affected. Over the years, various strategies have been developed to address the expertise gap, such as internship and apprenticeship programmes, seminars, bootcamps, etc. The Employer Project (EP) is one such effort implemented at a private higher education institution in Malaysia, where students analyse and solve business case studies or industry-relevant problems given by the partnering employers. These EPs are mapped to the course learning outcomes; therefore, finding and implementing suitable EPs that would match an English language course' learning outcomes has been challenging. This paper discusses a case study where the EP model is simulated for a degree-level Business English course assignment, involving an industry partner who has over 30 over years of industry experience. The assignment spanning across 11 weeks is based on a case study developed by the industry partner. After the students' face-to-face presentation session with the industry partner, a survey was conducted to gather their feedback. A preliminary text analysis revealed that while many of the students felt nervous while presenting to the industry partner, they found the session very enjoyable and helpful to their knowledge development. An interview with the industry partner revealed some areas of focus and suggestions to reduce the expertise gap. The implications include how EPs can make a degree-level language course more relevant in developing employability skills and how EPs can mitigate the negative impacts of AI tools in the language course.

Keywords: employer project, employability skills, work-integrated learning, English language course, tertiary education

Abstrak

Kajian terkini telah menekankan bahawa para graduan masih belum mencapai tahap kepakaran yang diperlukan oleh pihak industri. Selain itu, terdapat juga kebimbangan yang semakin meningkat bahawa penggunaan teknologi kecerdasan buatan (AI), seperti ChatGPT, mungkin menjejas perkembangan pengetahuan dan kemahiran pelajar peringkat pengajian tinggi. Pelbagai strategi telah dibangunkan untuk menangani jurang kepakaran ini, termasuk program latihan industri dan perantisan, seminar, 'bootcamp', dan lain-lain. Projek majikan (EP) merupakan salah satu usaha yang dilaksanakan di sebuah institusi pengajian tinggi swasta di Malaysia, di mana pelajar berpeluang untuk menganalisis dan menyelesaikan kajian kes perniagaan atau masalah yang relevan dengan industri daripada wakil industri. EP ini harus diselaraskan dengan hasil pembelajaran kursus; oleh itu, penentuan and pelaksanaan EP yang bersesuaian untuk kursus Bahasa Inggeris merupakan satu cabaran. Kajian kes ini membincangkan satu simulasi EP untuk sebuah kursus Bahasa Inggeris Perniagaan peringkat ijazah, yang melibatkan seorang wakil industri yang berpengalaman. EP yang menjangkau sebelas minggu adalah berdasarkan kajian kes yang dicipta oleh wakil industri tersebut. Selepas sesi pembentangan bersemuka pelajar dengan wakil industri, satu tinjauan telah dijalankan untuk mengumpulkan maklum balas mereka. Hasil analisis teks di peringkat awal mendapati bahawa ramai pelajar merasa gementar semasa sesi pembentangan dengan wakil industri, namun mereka berpendapat bahawa sesi tersebut sangat menyeronokkan dan membantu perkembangan pengetahuan mereka. Temubual dengan wakil industri juga mengungkap beberapa titik fokus dan cadangan untuk mengurangkan jurang kepakaran. Implikasi kajian termasuk bagaimana EP dapat menjadikan kursus bahasa peringkat ijazah lebih relevan dalam peningkatan kebolehpasaran graduan serta mengurangkan kesan negatif hasil pengunaan teknologi kecerdasan buatan.

Kata kunci: projek majikan (EP), kemahiran kebolehpasaran, pembelajaran berintegrasi kerja, kursus Bahasa Inggeris, pengajian tinggi.

■1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR4.0), which was introduced in Germany in 2011, involves the integration of advanced internet technology with human, physical objects, intelligent machines, production lines and production processes across organisational boundaries to form a new intelligent, networked, and agile value chain (Abdullah, Humaidi, & Shaharom, 2020; Schwab, 2016). IR 4.0 was predicted to massively revolutionise not just the economic sector but also all the other related sectors, including the education sector.

While the IR 4.0 was predicted to drastically affect the low-skilled and middle-skilled workforce, it was also expected to create new job opportunities with new qualifications and skill sets. Görmüş (2019) cited several skills which would be in-demand, such as the ability to self-organise, manage, work in teams, communicate, and use available ICT tools and technologies, and workers would need to be able to

apply these skills across disciplines. Furthermore, there was also a call to develop "human skills", such as "creativity, empathy, systemic thinking", which are, at present, not demonstrable by robots. Researchers that have studied the effects of IR 4.0 have also echoed the call of Professor Klaus Schwab, the Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, for the workforce, especially university students, to develop 4C elements, namely Communication, Creativity, Collaboration, and Critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Azamri & Zubbir, 2020; Ruminar & Gayatri, 2018; Schwab, 2016;). These 4Cs would form the backbone of today's graduate employability skills, aside from the other required technical skills of their respective industries.

In Malaysia, the IR 4.0 journey began in 2015, when the Malaysian government launched the National Internet of Things (IoT) Strategic Framework, but the transformation trajectory was dissatisfactory, picking up pace only in 2018 when the Readiness Assessment Intervention Programme and the Malaysia National Policy on Industry 4.0 was launched (Ali, 2022). Among the issues highlighted in this 2018 policy include the need to transform the human capital and to ready the workforce to adapt to the changes that IR 4.0 would bring, but one of challenges to do so was the mismatch of the education syllabus with industry needs. Therefore, various upskilling and reskilling efforts have been put in place to enable a smoother transition for the current workforce, and tertiary education providers must ensure that the graduating students align with the present industry demands (Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry, 2023).

However, a recent survey conducted by the Malaysian Employment Federation (MEF) revealed that new graduates are still not meeting the expertise requirements of the industry (Chua, 2023). The 2021 MEF salary survey revealed that graduates are still lacking in analytical skills (71.1%), problem-solving skills (66.3%), communication skills (52.8%), and leadership skills (44%). Indeed, this is an issue that have persisted for a long time. Various studies have found that graduates lacked soft skills (e.g. time management skills, teamworking skills, leadership skills), had poor communication skills and low self-confidence, demonstrated poor work ethics, and low critical-thinking and decision-making abilities, as well as lacked working experience (Teng et al., 2019; Zainuddin et al., 2019; Azmi et al., 2018; Prikshat et al., 2018; Nazron et al., 2017). Hussin et al. (2023) highlighted numerous studies that discussed the glaring difference between graduates' possessed skills sets and the expectations of the employers.

In fact, Malaysia's Economy Minister Mohd Rafizi Ramli explains that there is "a mismatch of skilled talent produced by local training institutions and the actual skills in demand by the market", resulting in the ongoing youth unemployment rate (Tay, 2023). The MEF calls for "closer partnerships between employers and higher education institutions" (Chua, 2023). Efforts such as internships, apprenticeships, and bootcamps, seminars, industry advisory boards, and other forms of work-based learning are necessary to offer students the practical experience that they need to improve their employability. Therefore, this case study focuses on one of the many strategies implemented by a private tertiary education institution in Malaysia to instil employability skills – the Employer Project (EP). The current study aims to explore the students' perceptions towards the involvement of the industry partner in this academia-industry collaborative effort, and to also shed light on the industry partner's perception of the students' performance.

■2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

It is evident that the crucial 4Cs are not skills that can be developed through the teacher-centred learning approach; thus, necessitating the shift to a more learner-centred learning approach. One of the common strategies employed is the problem-based learning strategy, where students work in groups to generate solutions to complex or authentic problems (Lubis et al., 2019). Hmelo-Silver and Barrows (2006) explains that these complex problems "do not necessarily have a single correct answer but require learners to consider alternatives and to provide a reasoned argument to support the solution that they generate". Research has shown that the problem-based learning strategy greatly benefits the learners: they have more opportunities to develop their critical thinking and reasoning skills, become more responsible over their learning (self-directed), as well as develop stronger group communication and team-working skills.

This learning strategy works well for the present generation of tertiary level students, who are from the Generation Z category (born 1996-2010), as they prefer a more collaborative style of learning, are more independent, and enjoy learning through experience and challenges which could be a result of their increased exposure to gaming technologies (Shorey et al., 2021; Manzoni et al., 2021). To nurture the 4Cs among undergraduates, the language classroom focus has to become less focused on grammar or functional expressions, and through the use of a problem-based learning strategy like the EP, the students can develop their language skills in a natural learning context and meaningful manner (Rogti, 2021; Ruminar & Gayatri, 2018).

This learning strategy is an excellent opportunity to involve the employers in their respective industries. In Australia, such collaboration is commonly known as work-integrated learning (WIL), which "aims to intentionally integrate work and educational experiences" to increase graduate workplace readiness (Atkinson, 2016). Arrangements of WIL at universities can either be impromptu or be specifically designed to be integrated into undergraduate or postgraduate courses (Venville, 2018). The latter would require careful design in order to purposefully connect the WIL experience to the course curriculum and assessment. Examples of WIL include placements at the target workplace, simulations at the university, and industry projects (Atkinson, 2016), as well as more innovative ones such as hackathons, and incubators/start-ups (Kay et al., 2019). WIL has become increasingly known as a vital tool to improve the knowledge and skills of graduates and prepare them for success at their future workplace. Jackson et. al (2016) highlighted various benefits of WILs, among which are exposing students to a realistic workplace experience, improving students' understanding of the complex processes at their respective industries, developing their technical and non-technical skills, etc.

In Malaysia, work-integrated learning has been adopted by most tertiary education institutions, and collaborations with the industry have been formalised (Mustafa, 2019). One such structured initiative at a private tertiary education institution is known as the employer project (EP) where students solve real-world problems, case studies, or issues affecting the industry given by the employers. The theoretical framework in which the EP is based on is Kolb (1984)'s experiential learning structure (Ali et al., 2018). The employers are registered businesses in the country who are industry partners with the institution. These projects are often tied to the course assessments, and so the choice of these projects is carefully made by the course instructor based on the course learning outcomes. In an EP, students

work collaboratively to develop solutions for the assigned problem, and they are required to clearly communicate what their solutions are, how they arrive at the solutions, and why their solutions work. For the EP to successfully achieve its objectives, thorough preparation is put in place to ensure that there is clear mapping of the knowledge and skills with the learning outcomes of the courses involved. In addition to the responsibilities of the course instructor, close collaboration with the industry partner and support rendered by the institution's Career Service department are all crucial to build meaningful student learning experience (Rambe, 2018). As a formalized project embedded in the course curriculum and assessment, the EP consists of several stages and the main ones include project and course mapping by the course instructor, preparation by the career services team, project briefing and checkpoints with the industry partner, final submissions and presentations to the employer and lecturer, as well as employer project feedback submission (Pereira et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2018).

Literature on students' perception of the involvement of industry partners in their assessment and learning, and the industry partner's feedback of students' performance during the EPs are few. Therefore, the current study attempts to address this gap through a simulated EP for a business English course. The simulated EP model was adopted for various reasons. Firstly, one of the main requirements in the selection of an employer project is the relevance to achieving the course learning outcomes. This restricted the types of projects that can be chosen from the list of industry partners compiled by the institution's Career Service department. Secondly, this course was shared with two other campuses, and since this project was tied to the assignment and presentation assessment components, standardising the assessment would mean conducting a full-scale EP across three campuses, and this could be overwhelming for the partnering company due to the large number of participants and logistic arrangements. Nevertheless, Atkinson (2016) emphasised that simulations are effective forms of WIL as they create realistic working experiences for the students. Moreover, this simulated EP involved the same process as the full-scale EP and the close collaboration of an industry partner. This study aims to answer two research questions:

      (1) How do the students perceive the involvement of an industry partner in the project?
      (2) How have the students performed during their session with the industry partner (from the industry perspective)?

■3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participant Description

This case study was conducted at a private higher education institution, involving an English for Business Studies course offered to first year business degree students of varying majors – marketing, accounting, finance, event management, and business management. There were in total 80 students who were involved in this project, a mixture of first semester and second semester students. These students worked in self-initiated groups of 3-5 members, and a total of 18 groups were formed. This project spanned across 11 weeks in the 14-week semester (Week 3-Week 13). The final outcomes of this project were in the form of a written report and a final group presentation, which were assessed by the lecturer based on a set rubric.

The industry partner for this project was a semi-retired industry partner doing freelance consulting, Mr. Ng, who has more than 25 years of industry experience at the top management level, and he played the role of the employer and co-developed the case problem for this project. This industry partner was sourced from the lecturer's personal network, based on the years of experience in the industry, willingness to participate in this long project, and availability to commit to the project schedule.

3.2 The Simulated Employer Project Process

The project objective, course learning outcomes, roles, and processes were carefully explained to the industry partner two months before the semester began, and both lecturer and industry partner worked on the case problem and developed a case brief. The case problem in this study required the students to evaluate four start-up dessert companies (fictitious companies) and based on their evaluation, recommend the best option to be acquired by a dairy company seeking to improve its brand name, reach, and performance. The case was designed based on the real-life acquisition of The Inside Scoop Sdn. Bhd. by Farm Fresh Bhd. This same case study was used by the other campuses for the assignment and presentation components, where the other students also analysed the same case for their assignment but without the involvement of an industry partner in the process.

As the participants in this study were first year students with limited business knowledge, a reading list was compiled with the assistance of the industry partner. This list states the areas or business concepts, such as business mergers and acquisitions, brand name, bran presence, etc., which the students are encouraged to read up on so that they can more successfully solve the case. Furthermore, some students may be in their first semester, which meant that they were still adapting to a new learning environment and different teaching and learning styles across the four to five courses that they were enrolled in for the semester. This would help give them a head start in their research and prevent them from feeling overwhelmed.

To kickstart the project in Week 3 of the semester, the industry partner gave the project briefing, explaining about the company, the present situation, and the project objective (acquire one of the four shortlisted dessert companies). This explanation was pre-recorded, and the video posted in the course in the institution's learning management system, Canvas. This allowed students to revisit the explanation as and when they needed clarification. Similarly, all the other project-related resources (including the reading list) were also posted on Canvas. Any questions for the industry partner were directed to the lecturer, who compiled and passed them on to him, so that he would not be bombarded with too many individual correspondences. This also helped the lecturer keep track of each group's progress.

After that, all the groups began working on their analysis and research. Each group's team leader was responsible for keeping track of their progress. All groups were required to complete their problem identification and evaluation of each acquisition prospect, and they needed to present their analysis in the first project checkpoint (Week 6 of the semester). This session was conducted with only the lecturer. This checkpoint was necessary to make sure students were thorough and clear with their analysis, to ensure every team member was contributing actively, and to prevent them from going off track. Once this session was completed, students could then proceed with choosing one of the four companies to be recommended and to prepare to justify their choice.

In Week 8 of the semester, students were required to present their recommendation and justifications to the employer. This session was a face-to-face session, and each group had 15-20 minutes with the employer, together with the lecturer (no other groups were present to prevent students from stealing each other's ideas). After each group's presentation (10 minutes), the employer gave feedback on their analysis and justification, asked them questions, and suggested areas to improve on (10 minutes). A written summarised version of the oral feedback was later provided to the students. Based on the feedback from the employer, all groups had another 2 weeks to do the necessary revisions and finalised their written reports for the final submission in Week 11. The students also had to present their final analysis in Week 13 of the semester, but this session involved only the lecturer and the students.

3.3 Data Collection

Data for research question 1 was gathered from the student feedback survey conducted after the submission of the written report. This feedback is integral to ensure the continued relevance and success of the EPs towards developing realistic and meaningful learning experiences. However, as the EP involves the interaction and participation of the industry partner on a workplace or business situation, the student feedback obtained through the standard student evaluation of teaching and learning may be insufficient (Venville, 2018), and as such, a separate student feedback survey was developed and customized for this simulated EP to capture a more accurate understanding of the participants' opinions, the overall effectiveness, and areas of improvement.

Earlier studies on EPs by Pereira et al. (2022) and Ali et al. (2018) utilized a three-point Likert scale survey and focus group interviews to analyse quantitatively and qualitatively the students' attitude towards the EP, their collaboration with their peers, the assigned task and challenges that they faced, the workplace skills that they felt they had developed, and the effectiveness of the EP in promoting workplace skills among students. Meanwhile, the survey questions in this current study were developed with the main goal of gathering students' opinions about the involvement of the industry partner and the project assignment process, in general.

This survey was conducted via Google Forms to gain insight into the students' opinion of the simulated employer project assignment, specifically focusing on how they feel about the involvement of the industry partner in the learning and assessment process. This survey was made available for 7 days, and at the end of the duration, 62 project participants responded. The survey comprised six questions, and the first four questions will be addressed in this study, as they render answers to the first research question. The remaining two questions are general ones for the course and not within the scope of this paper.

1. Did you find the consultation session with the industry partner enjoyable?
2. Have the comments and feedback received during the session helped you develop and organize your ideas for the assignment?
3. How does presenting to the industry partner make you feel? Why so?
4. Are there any aspects of the session with the industry partner that can be improved on? List down one or two.
5. Would you like to have more sessions with industry partners? If yes, please suggest some activities or topics that you would prefer.
6. Share your thoughts about the assignment process (e.g. the duration, the choice of case study topics, the timeline, the consultations, etc.). Are there areas that can be improved on?

A face-to-face interview was also conducted with the industry partner to gather data for the second research question. The interview focused on exploring the industry partner's opinions about the students' overall performance. This was done immediately after all the groups had presented to ensure more accurate recall of the emotions and experience. The interview was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

Responses to Question 1 and Question 2 were tabulated according to the three-scale option – Very much, Somewhat, and Just a little. Question 3 and Question 4 were open-ended questions, so a bottom-up text analysis approach was utilised as it could reveal how the students felt about their engagement with the industry partner during the session. A text analysis was conducted, and the participants' responses were manually read and re-read, to identify repeated keywords and expression patterns. This process was repeated for the industry partner's interview transcript. This type of thematic analysis is commonly adopted in the business and social science field, and it has been shown useful in obtaining in-depth analysis of data (Patton, 2014).

■4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Research Question 1: Students' perception of the industry partner's involvement in the project

Question 1 of the survey seeks to understand how the students generally felt about the session where they had to present and justify their group's recommendation to the industry partner. The result of the analysis presented in Figure 1 showed that many of the respondents indicated some levels of enjoyment towards the session. However, students who indicated that they enjoyed the session very much were just slightly more than half of the total, with many of them having moderate feelings about the session.
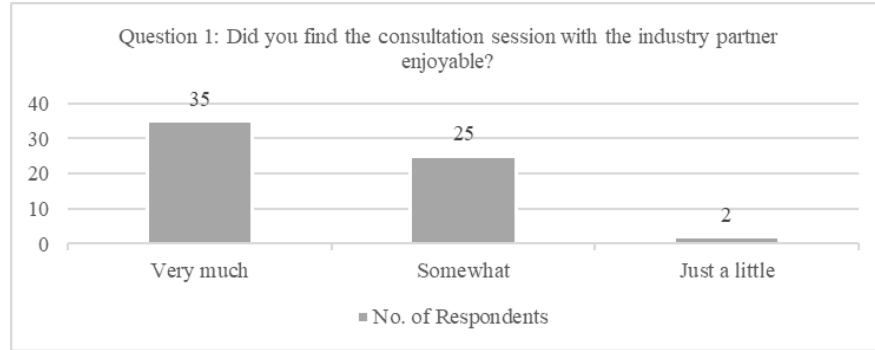

Figure 1. Enjoyability of the Consultation Session with the Industry Partner

Question 2 in the survey sought to understand if the comments and feedback given by the employer during the session had helped them improve the way they had argued for and justified their recommendation. As shown in Figure 2, most of the respondents gave positive responses, with 73% of them indicating that the comments and feedback received had helped them in their idea development. The students seem to acknowledge that the industry partner's involvement is a helpful part of their learning process.
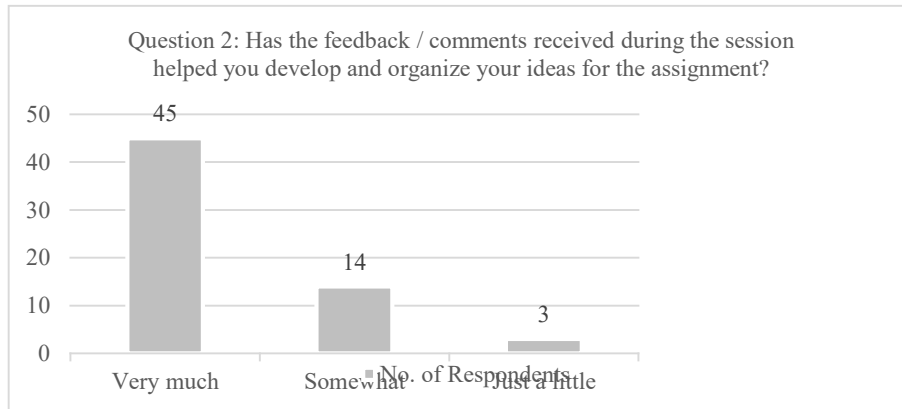

Figure 2. Helpfulness of the Comments or Feedback to Content Development

Question 3 was "How does presenting to the industry partner make you feel? Why so?", and this open-ended question was asked to gain a deeper insight into the students' feelings during the session and what caused them to feel the way they felt. The responses varied in length, with a total average of 21 words, which is an important indicator that the respondents had thought through and had attempted to express their emotions in writing. Keywords or expressions that were used to express how they felt (adjectives) that were frequently repeated are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1. Keywords and Expressions Patterns Used to Express Emotions

	Keywords / Expression Patterns	No. of Occurrences
Convey negative emotions	Felt nervous / nerve-wrecking	40
	Felt scared / terrified	3
	Felt worried / anxious / pressured	4
Convey positive emotions	Felt good / good experience / fulfilling	6
	Felt excited / enjoyment	5
	Felt professional	4
	Felt relaxed / chill / comfortable	4

The number of occurrences for expressions of negative emotions, like 'nervous', 'scared', and 'worried', is significantly higher than expressions of positive emotions. Some responses recorded only negative emotions. However, there were also responses with a mixture of emotions, e.g. feeling nervous and excited.

When further analysed, the expressions of negative emotions were due to various factors, as shown in Table 2.. The most common cause, especially for feeling 'nervous', was that the students were presenting to someone from the industry (15 mentions). Many were nervous because it was their first time ever presenting to an industry representative (12 mentions). This could perhaps be due to the way they perceive industry representatives as people who are very important or more special, and hence they want to make a good impression (Respondents 17 and 37). Some were nervous because of the content or industry knowledge that the industry representative would have, so they felt that their arguments could be "nit-picked" on, as mentioned by Respondent 24 below. The second major cause was that they were presenting to someone they were not familiar with, i.e. someone who is not their classmate or lecturer (Respondent 59). Not knowing what to expect of this stranger, such as his reactions and his moods, as well as not being able to read and predict his facial expressions while they were presenting, caused them to feel nervous. The third major cause was the fear of presenting, in general (4 mentions). This small number of mentions suggests that the students did not have a fear of giving class presentations and were adequately confident in their presentation skills.

Table 2. Excerpts Showing Causes of Negative Emotions

Respondent	Excerpts
17	*It was nerve-wracking. Mainly because he is known as an industry partner, so I wouldn't want to disappoint him during the presentation*
37	*Presenting to the industry partner made me feel nervous because he was someone new and someone I was not familiar with and I want to give him a good impression of me.*
24	*It made me feel nervous as I know I will be presenting to someone who can nitpick on the details of the given topic to study.*
26	*Nervous because this is my first time conduct a presentation with industry partner who has deep knowledge on the particular industry.*
51	*It made me feel somewhat pressured, because I had to present to someone who has more knowledge in the business field than I do.*
59	*Presenting to Mr. Ng, the industry partner makes me feel nervous and challenged as this is my first time present to a person who is not my lecturer or teacher. I don't know what's he thinking when I look at his face and I don't know how his reaction is.*
7	*Nervous. Even the person is not industry partner, I will scared to persent too.*
29	*It made me feel very anxious and nervous as public speaking is not my strong suit and it was added by the factor of presenting in front of the industry partner who I have never met and there was internal pressure to do better.*

Interestingly, the expressions of positive emotions were also driven by the fact that the students were presenting to someone from the industry, as shown in Table 3.. The students felt that the presence of the industry representative made the session more real and serious, and it raised their sense of professionalism (7 mentions). Having the opportunity to have an industry representative listen and give feedback to their ideas created a sense of excitement, and it made them feel good. With the feedback they received, they could be more certain of their work, thus making them feel more confident with the direction their assignment is heading towards. Another cause of the positive emotions was the way they perceived the industry representative and the lecturer – "looked friendly" (6 mentions).

Table 3. Excerpts Showing Causes of Positive Emotions

Respondent	Excerpts
19	*Presenting to the industry partner makes me feel more professional indeed and also prepares me for my next presentation.*
38	*It made the whole experience, more engaging and professional, having a face-to-face interview with an industry partner gave an element of realism that took it seriously*
55	*It gives me a sense of professionalism; having our findings being presented to the industry as well as hearing constructive feedback.*
58	*feel so good, because of like a proper consultation in a real company.*
4	*Initially I was terrified and nervous but later I realised that it was an opprtunity to gain feedback and know we were in the right track or not.*
13	*It was really nerve wrecking in the beginning. However, I felt a comfortable and friendly feeling from Mr. Ng and Ms. X as soon as we started presenting. So, it was quite comforting to present, although I stuttered during the presentation.*
48	*Nervous and excited to meet the industry partner. Because not every industry partner has the time to greet students at campus.*
34	*He was very welcoming and made us feel comfortable. His critics were very thorough but all of it made absolute sense. His feedbacks have guided me to think outside of the box and get creative with my ideas as well as further improvise on it.*

Question 4 of the survey sought to understand the students' feedback about aspects that were lacking and needed improvement during the session involving the industry partner. This was also an open-ended question so that the students may more freely express their dissatisfaction and recommendations. Out of the 60 responses for this question, 5 responses were deemed irrelevant due to students misunderstanding the question. The responses given were related to areas that they themselves could improve on. 21 responses were positive responses, where students indicated that they had no comments or that industry partner had "done well", as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Excerpts Showing Positive / Neutral Feedback on Session with Industry Partner

Respondent	Excerpts
4	*There was nothing to improve as the industry partner guide us with the assignment and our lecture gave ideas to better our presentation. Their question made us think more deep and identify our part.*
12	*No, the session was good and he really helped a lot by giving his feedback.*
16	*Nope, there is no improvement needed, as everything is done accordingly.*
28	*The suggestions provided by the industry partner are clear.*
58	*No, I think Mr. Ng explained in details about how to improve in our argumentative essays and report.*

The text analysis on the remaining 34 responses revealed five areas of improvement, as presented in Table 5, with the sample excerpts shown in Table 6.

Table 5. Areas that Were Lacking / Needed Improvement

Areas that Were Lacking / Needed improvement	No. of Occurrences
Time aspect for the session	10
Feedback given by the industry partner	10
Presenters' speaking turn during the feedback session	7
Session set-up	4
Industry partner's personality	3

The first three areas seemed to be inter-connected, with the first area being the root cause – time. The presentations were done during class hours (2 hours to 2.5 hours), with each group presenting consecutively. As a result, students seem to feel that the presentation time of 10-15 minutes was too short for them to present their recommended solution and the justification. This may have also affected the feedback session as groups that exceeded their presentation time would have less time for feedback from the industry partner. The feedback session would also have been more unidirectional instead of an interactive session where students could respond to or seek clarification about the industry partner's comments.

Table 6. Excerpts about Areas that are Lacking / Needing Improvement

Respondent	Excerpts
3	*The duration of a session can be longer a bit*
6	*I think the duration of the session can be longer so I can present more details to present.*
19	*Maybe give a more detailed explanation of what changes need to be made. Other than that it was all good.*
27	*maybe can provide more examples for reference.*
52	*The industry partner could improved on giving more suggestions, guidelines and advices.*
57	*I think that the industry partner can give more feedback to every single presentation group members.*
11	*After feedback, maybe give some chance to let us rebate the opinion or point, so that we can understand more deeply and state our point more clearly afterwards.*
23	*Maybe leave the presenter some time to voice out opinions? Overall is was outstanding as Mr ng is very patient and full of smiles on his face.*
32	*maybe can invite more than one industry partner to give the different opinion.*
46	*I hope the industry partner could be more friendly as he looks so fierce.*

It does appear that despite feeling nervous about the session, students were looking forward to having more time to receive feedback from the industry partner regarding their work and some even wanted the chance to interact with the industry partner. And while their responses in Question 2 showed that, in general, the feedback given had helped them improve their idea development, some students may have expected more examples and specific guidance on how to improve their work, which is not the role of the industry partner in this session.

This could have resulted in feelings of dissatisfaction among the students as their expectations were not met, leading to the higher number of "somewhat" in Question 1.

4.2 Research Question 2: Feedback on Students' Performance by the Industry Partner

The second research question sought to determine the students' performance from the perspective of the industry partner. An analysis of the interview with the industry partner highlighted desirable and undesirable traits that he had observed during the presentation sessions. Both the lecturer and the industry partner exchanged general notes about each group's performance. The two areas that were highlighted during the interview were the students' communication skills and critical thinking / problem-solving skills.

The industry partner observed that several students exuded confidence in their speech while some were lacking in their English communication abilities. However, he pointed out that some of the students with speech weakness were still able to capture his attention more than those without speech weakness as they had presented logically developed and well-supported arguments:

> *"Even for those whose spoken language skills may not be great, some of them tried hard to speak up and their content knowledge held them up over their speech weakness".*

In contrast, some who could speak well were observed to be under-prepared in their content, and despite their good command of the language, they had made a poor impression on him. This could be inferred from the use of negative words and expressions such as "*unsure*", "*uneducated*", and "*inability to relate*":

> *"There were a number of students that exude confidence naturally but they <u>need to do a bit more homework on the topic</u> they are arguing else it is hidden behind their command of the language… Many of them are <u>unsure</u> or <u>uneducated</u> in the points they are arguing. They <u>should at least</u> make some preliminary research on the topics they are addressing and <u>sound more intelligent</u>."*

> *"I saw <u>what most students have done that employers will not value</u> which is their inability to relate always to objectives. They tend to remain generic in giving answers and forgetting why they were engaging in the first place. They need to always relate to the assignment objective else they would be <u>wasting their bosses's time</u>."*

Aside from language matters, the industry partner also highlighted about the students' ability to relate to the given objectives, which he holds as extremely important in the industry. He observed that students were able to give arguments to support their recommendation, but the reasoning is only at a surface level, are merely general claims, or are not connected to the case problem at hand. A sense of frustration could be inferred from the phrase used in the above excerpts "*should at least…sound more intelligent*" and "*what most students have done that employers will not value*", and "*wasting their bosses' time*", and this could be because his basic expectations of a proposal presentation were not satisfied.

■5.0 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

While many of the students seemed to have experienced more negative emotions than positive ones, the session with the employer was still perceived as enjoyable and helpful. O'Leary (2015) who studied the influence of collaborations with employers on graduates' employability discovered that such collaborations "appear to have a positive impact on the employability prospects of graduates and the increased confidence of the graduates to deal with employers is striking". In this case, students were made aware of the purpose of the session, which was to give them a chance to experience a real-world business presentation and to check how their arguments would hold in the eyes of an industry representative. They were informed that they could make use of the feedback given to revise their analysis before the final submission. Based on the lecturer's observations during the session, it was evident that several groups were taking down notes or even audio-recording the feedback session, and after the session, they scheduled for additional appointments with the lecturer to discuss the revisions that they had made, even though they were not required to. While their submitted reports were not analysed for this paper, it is worth noting that there was an improvement in terms of the clarity of their arguments and their provision of stronger evidence to support their arguments. Even though the time spent with the employer was limited, the EP seems to still have had some influence on the students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as their attitude towards completing the task. This finding agrees with Pereira et al. (2022), which clearly indicated that students had shown positive response towards the EP.

Furthermore, from this simulated EP session, it is evident that the status of the audience (whether a lecturer or an employer) does influence the students' emotion, and this could be a key factor in driving their learning. In a study by Badiozaman et al. (2018), it was discovered that students in the higher education were very aware of the importance of English for the job market; however, they also admitted that their English competency may not be adequate. Reports after reports have also shown that this awareness does not translate into actual improvements in the communication skills. This raises the question if the lack of desire to improve could be due to the lack of perceived importance of who these students are dealing with. Iftode (2019) explains that the Gen-Z students are constantly looking for a connection of what they are learning with their real life. Therefore, there is a possibility that the students' desire to use and improve their communication skills could increase if they were given "real" audiences who are knowledgeable enough to spar with them and whom they want to impress, not just the course lecturer. The findings in this study seem to suggest that the students do hope for a chance to engage in more discussions with the industry partner, and while time management and the session set-up need to be improved, the simulated EP strategy appears to provide such an experiential learning opportunity that they may desire.

Just as Jackson et al. (2016) and Rambe (2018) had discussed, the mismatch of expectations could be a potential barrier to the success of the work-integrated learning approach. In this simulated EP in English course, the expectations of the students, the course

instructor, and the industry partner may have differed to a certain extent. The students had view the industry partner's role as similar to the course instructor – to provide them detailed feedback and guidance on how to improve their ideas for the assignment. The industry partner, on the other hand, had expected the students to be more thoroughly prepared with more logical and better developed ideas to solve the problems he had given them in this case study. The course instructor's role, which was to observe and feedback on the students' presentation skills, expected presentations which may have seemed impressive (great intonation, confident presentation, smooth and accurate language use) to make an impression on the industry partner, but some seemingly impressive presenters received negative feedback from the industry partner due to poor idea development. Instead, those with language weaknesses were praised by the industry partner, and the language mistakes were overlooked as the ideas could still be understood. This possible mismatch of expectation or priorities requires further investigation, but this study supports the call for more student-friendly and pragmatic training and coaching efforts be conducted in collaboration with the industry (Neesaratnam et al., 2020). Collaborations need to go beyond interviews and surveys, and must involve active participation of all the three parties, with more careful planning being put in for time management and managing expectations. One thing is for certain, for an English course at the tertiary level, improving communication skills does not equate to only improving their grammar. Over-focusing on grammar and language structures could negatively affect students' desire to improve and confidence to use the language. Instead, students need to improve on the ability to clearly and coherently express ideas.

Finally, with the introduction of AI tools like ChatGPT, many are concerned that critical-thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and communication skills would decline as students are bypassing the process of making sense of the pool of information and even skipping the writing process entirely (Sullivan, Kelly, and McLaughlan, 2023). While there seems to be no possible way at present to stop students from using AI tools, the EP offers a possible way to still make students utilise their thinking and language skills. The industry partner is a content specialist who can question and challenge the ideas presented by the students' or seek for more elaboration, and students know that they cannot fake their way through the presentation. Students would have to make sure that they work on their language skills and think on their feet so that they can adequately explain their ideas in a conversational manner, which is something that ChatGPT cannot prepare them for. As for written reports, while ChatGPT can offer suggestions on what to cite to support the arguments, it does not provide useful references (Sullivan, Kelly, and McLaughlan, 2023), and this means students will still need to apply reading skills and analytical skills to assess and determine useful, relevant secondary sources, and synthesise them coherently to support their arguments within the given case context. Of course, this would mean that language course lecturers will now need to focus on academic skills, such as determining reliable and relevant secondary sources for supporting arguments, and the assignment rubrics would need to be revised to meet the new needs. On another note, this may be a challenge that these Gen Z undergraduates are driven to complete (Seibert, 2021), and as this study has shown, being able to make a good impression on the industry partner could become a form of reward.

■6.0 CONCLUSION

This study has revealed some useful insights as to how the EP can help a language course lecturer navigate the future of a business English course. Even though it was not a full-scale employer project, the real-world context that the simulated EP creates and the collaboration between the academician and industry representative do help to create more opportunities for students to develop employability skills that meet the industry's expectations. Lastly, ChatGPT and other AI tools may have perhaps thrown a spanner in the works for the time being in the higher education sector, and course instructors will have to make a lot of changes to adapt to this new landscape; nevertheless, the EP does offer the potential to integrate new technology without sacrificing the students' learning process.

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