



# European Journal of Educational Research

Volume 11, Issue 2, 1089 - 1102.

ISSN: 2165-8714

<https://www.eu-jer.com/>

## Twenty-First Century Essential Employability Skills for English as a Foreign Language Undergraduates in a Context of the Mekong Delta

Van Thi Tuyet Phan   
Can Tho University, VIETNAM

Linh Dang Thuy Nguyen   
Can Tho University, VIETNAM

Khang Duy Nguyen\*   
Can Tho University, VIETNAM

*Received: November 25, 2021 • Revised: December 30, 2021 • Accepted: March 1, 2022*

**Abstract:** This study aimed to investigate essential employability skills for English as a foreign language (EFL) students in the Mekong Delta for the context of the 21st century. It was also to determine the similarities and differences between the important employability skills from the perspectives of the employers and EFL students. In this study, a questionnaire was delivered to EFL students who were juniors and seniors at a university in the South of Vietnam, majoring in English Education and English Studies (English Interpreter). At the same time, interviews were realized on both EFL students and employers. The findings showed that both EFL students and employers highlighted the attributes of self-confidence, receptiveness to feedback, and the use of body language in communication. The types of employability skills are similarly recognized among employers and EFL students in the same fields of employment. However, a significant difference was also found among employers on different job-specific skills. The results also indicated that EFL undergraduates were all highly aware of preparing the employability skills for their future professions.

**Keywords:** *EFL students, employers' demand, employability skills, job requirements, 21st century.*

**To cite this article:** Phan, T. T. V., Nguyen, D. T. L., & Nguyen, D. K. (2022). Twenty-first century essential employability skills for English as a foreign language undergraduates in a context of the Mekong delta. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 11(2), 1089-1102. <https://doi.org/10.12973/eu-jer.11.2.1089>

### Introduction

According to the study of Suarta et al. (2017), the workplaces in the 21st century require EFL undergraduates not only essential occupation-specific skills to meet the demand of the labor market, but additional important skills and attributes called employability skills as well. It leads to the fact that once 21st century learning skills are activated properly and embedded into students' curricula, the involvement is beneficial to students to prepare them for their future careers (Alismail & McGuire, 2015)

In fact, it is very important to alternate and implement methods to help students enhance these employability skills. The integration of 21st century skills in higher education training programs provides students with more opportunities to gain success in their careers (Lamb et al., 2017). From the essence of the free market, employers are constantly searching for good employees that enable their businesses to develop, and employers. However, today's applicants usually lack soft skills (Schooley, 2017).

In Vietnam, many skills have been prepared at school for a satisfying job and for efficient employment. However, these skills are not fully compatible with the requirements of the labor market, or the level of equipped skills is not satisfactory. Those necessary skills include soft skills and social skills. An undeniable link is found between learning outcomes and economic growth, especially for young people entering the workforce (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2021). Larson and Miller's report (2011) mentioned that students need to be good at their expertise, skills, and knowledge to successfully enter today's workforce. To be well-prepared for the labor market, students should be aware of how their skills can be applied in the professional world.

Moreover, currently in Vietnam, the orientation of soft skills development in most Vietnamese universities is still limited and is completely absent in some schools or institutions (Truong et al., 2016). As a result, a "skills gap" exists between academic skills and social or behavioral skills, which leads to poor job performance. To some extent, Vietnamese EFL students may lack appropriate skills in order to catch up with the requirements of society. Obviously, the contexts highlighted students that need to learn the working skills, get experience, and improve their capacity

\* Corresponding author:

Khang Duy Nguyen, Can Tho University, Vietnam. ✉ [ndkhang@ctu.edu.vn](mailto:ndkhang@ctu.edu.vn)

© 2022 The Author(s). **Open Access** - This article is under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



instead of changing the jobs very quickly. For the aforementioned reasons, this research was conducted to figure out some essential employability skills for EFL students in the 21st century in order to help them be aware of their preparation process and be able to adapt themselves to the society.

### Literature Review

Employability skills are defined by many different scholars. Saad and Majid (2014) emphasized that employability skills are basic necessary skills in order to get, keep, and do well in a job. It is not only for the employees to get a satisfying job, but it also helps them to achieve potential promotion and contribute to the enterprises.

According to Knight and Yorke (2003), employability skills are considered “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations which benefit themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy” (page 8). It is easy to be seen that graduates can gain lots of benefits within their jobs thanks to having employability skills as an achievement (Knight & Yorke, 2003).

Most of the employees need employability skills to meet the demands of the employers as well as to promote themselves to be better evaluated. In every profession, there are different requirements for the participants in enterprises. As reported in Confederation of British Industry (CBI) (2009), three components are importantly involved in employability skills, which are attributes, skills, and knowledge. In CBI’s definition, the differences between skills and attributes are not clarified, while Department of Education, Science, and Training (2004) makes a clear distinction between skills and attributes, in which skills are ability one needs to conduct a particular task, and attributes are ones’ behavior and attitudes which are not based on their skills (Keller et al., 2011).

It can be obvious that employability skills are defined as a set of social skills that we use to facilitate our work or learning. These skills are also called key skills, core skills, or essential skills, which are hindered under the nature of employability skills. These skills are acquired through an individual’s career or life. Each person will have a different way to develop themselves and the employability skills of the employees will differ quite dramatically (Tomlinson, 2012).

#### *The needs for employability skills in 21st century*

Career readiness involves three areas of major skills recognized as core academic skills, employability skills, and technical or job-specific skills. These skills are all important to prepare students to be ready for a career in the future. While core academic skills are those that prepare students with appropriate professional knowledge, employability skills help students to have essential skills in any career area (Cotton, 1993). The Employability Skills Framework of this study was adapted from the Department of Education, Science, and Training (2004). Regarding this, the employability skills needed for the 21st century were categorized into eight main groups: (1) *Communication skills*, (2) *Teamwork skills*, (3) *Problem-solving skills*, (4) *Initiative and enterprise skills*, (5) *Planning and organizing skills*, (6) *Self-management skills*, (7) *Learning skills*, and (8) *Technology skills*.

In addition, Suarta et al. (2017) highly emphasized the importance of employability skills because workers are expected to have many necessary skills and attributes related to their jobs. For EFL students, employability skills are even more and more essential, so a need for EFL students to equip themselves with appropriate knowledge, skills, and personal attributes is vital. Employability skills become an important link between educational values and job demands.

As a result, in addition to basic and specialized knowledge, EFL students are expected to prepare their own set of skills and attributes in order to be employed and meet the employers’ demands (Suarte et al., 2017). Employability skills should be implemented into the practices and learning processes in order to develop students’ critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, social competencies, and so on (Fandino, 2013). EFL students need to equip with 21st century skills in order to be active users (Han & Aybirdi, 2016). Similarly, necessary employability skills in the 21st century help students to have a better life and better work. A special link between English and employability regarding employers’ requirements on their employees exists, so many studies have indicated the role of English education and employability skills for EFL students (Tran, 2012).

### Methodology

A descriptive mixed-methods study aims to answer the following questions for examining the needs of employability skills from EFL students’ perspectives and employers’ demands:

1. What employability skills do EFL students consider to be important to have in the 21st century?
2. What employability skills do employers expect from EFL students upon their graduation?

Both quantitative and qualitative instruments of questionnaire and interviews were equally employed to effectively address the two research questions. Two groups of participants included:

Fifty-six EFL juniors and seniors (ten males (17.8%) and forty-six females (82.2%)), majoring in English Teacher Education, English Studies and Translation) at a University in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam were invited to respond to the questionnaire. Four of them accepted to take part in the in-depth interviews. Besides, two managers- one from an English Language Center and the other from a company specialized in hotel and restaurant agreed to be interviewed.

The semi-interviews were aimed to find out employability skills that students wished to have while studying in addition to the employers' perspectives to figure out their expectations about the employability skills that their workers should possess in the 21st century.

The questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale was utilized, ranging from 1 to 5, corresponding to "Not important", "Slightly important", "Moderately important", "Important" and "Very important". Besides, the closed-ended questions, the questionnaire also employed one open-ended question after each cluster for different ideas for the case of insufficiently covering the whole employability skills required in the reality.

After getting the results, the quantitative data were analyzed via the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 20. The result showed that the reliability coefficient was high (Cronbach's alpha = .904). The Descriptive Statistic Test was run to report the participants' evaluation of the importance of employability skills. Then One-Sample t-test was also run to check whether there was a discrepancy amongst participants on their perceptions toward the importance of employability skills in their jobs. The mean score at the significant test values will be discussed in accordance with the interpretation of the range indicating values of the testing aspects. The mean range specifies the perception about the employability skills as of high importance (3.66 – 5.0), medium importance (2.33 – 3.66), and low importance (lower 2.33). This range means that the scale of the testing items or clusters with the significant testing values in one of the three ranges would demonstrate the meanings related to the testing scales.

For qualitative data analysis, the data included those from the semi-interviews and those from open-ended questions in the questionnaire. The responses were carefully transcribed and then framed and recoded using Padilla (1994) and Nguyen (2018). The extracts from the interviews were coded among the EFL students from different majors and employers from different enterprises. The coding methods for each concept were conducted using Nguyen (2018) as below:

The following table showed how the categories of participants and skills were coded in the study. An expert in qualitative coding was invited to process and ensure the validity and quality of the codes based on the provided categories, and then the authors rechecked it to avoid omissions.

*Table 1: Codes for Participants and Groups of Skills*

Categories		Codes
<b>Participants</b>	Students of English Studies	S-S
	Students of English Teacher Education (1,2,3)	S-E (1,2,3)
	Employer of English Center	Er-C
	Employer of Hospitality Industry	Er-H
	Respondent 1-56	R1-56
<b>Groups of skills</b>	- Communication skills	Co
	- Team-work skills	Tw
	- Problem-solving skills	Ps
	- Initiative and enterprising skills	Ie
	- Planning and organizing skills	Po
	- Self-management skills	Sm
	- Learning skills	Le
	- Technology skills	Te
- Other skills	Os	

*Table 2: Coding extracts for qualitative data from the questionnaire*

Code	Extracts	Coded for
QQ1-R13	"Create and maintain a relationship"	Q = Questionnaire Q1 = Open-ended question 1 R13 = Respondent 13
QQ1-R20	"Pressure release skills. Any job has a certain level of pressure, depending on the personality of each person that has a different way to release the pressure. However, if you do not have this skill at work, you cannot find a sustainable job, in long term, you feel depressed, and the task will not be solved and completely completed"	Q = Questionnaire Q1 = Open-ended question 1 R20 = Respondent 20

Table 2: Continued

Code	Extracts	Coded for
QQ2-R11	"Adaptation skills, working well under pressure"	Q = Questionnaire Q2 = Open-ended question 2 R11 = Respondent 11
QQ2-R49	"Learn from the other people continuously"	Q = Questionnaire Q2 = Open-ended question 2 R49 = Respondent 49

Table 3: Coding extracts for qualitative data from interviews

Code	Extracts	Coded for
S-E1- Co-149	"In addition to learning online, teachers also need social communication skills, with colleagues and superiors or managers"	S-E1 = Student 1 of English Teacher Education Co = Communication 149 = Extracting line
S-E1- Tw-56	"Those who did it before also shared experiences for new employees, they also helped me when I didn't know anything, I asked them"	S-E1 = Student 1 of English Teacher Education Tw = Teamwork 56 = Extracting line
S-E3- Ps-19	"I think I learned problem-solving skills from my colleagues who are older than me"	S-E3 = Student 3 of English Teacher Education Ps = Problem solving 19 = Extracting line
Er-C-Ie- 135	"The teaching environment is different, the teaching materials or tests or whatever have to follow the curriculum of the Ministry, the government so that teachers cannot have the creativity in teaching"	Er-C = Employer of English Center Ie = Initiative and enterprising 135 = Extracting line

### Findings / Results

The findings indicate that EFL learners have varied perceptions about different groups of skills of employability including (1) communication skills, (2) teamwork skills, (3) problem-solving skills, (4) Initiative and Enterprising skills, (5) Planning and Organizing skills, (6) Self-management skills, (7) Learning skills, (8) Technology skills, and some other new skills that were not reviewed and listed in the study. Three of the first eight groups of employability skills would be chosen as representatives for analyzing and discussing in this journal to clarify the research questions.

First, communication skills are perceived as one of the most important skills. Of which, listening is the most important sub-skill when the interlocutor talks ( $M=4.82$ ), and the least important sub-skills is using body language to enhance mutual understanding ( $M=4.07$ ).

Table 4: One-Sample Statistics Test for Communication Skills

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Score
Communication skills	9.160	55	.00	4.47

One Sample t-test was run to check whether the mean score ( $M=4.47$ ) is different from the test value 4.0. The result showed that a significant difference between the mean ( $M=4.47$ ) and the test value 4.0 was observed ( $p=.00$ ,  $df=55$ ). The level of EFL students' awareness of the necessity of communication skills is higher than 4.0, signifying a quite high degree of awareness of students on the communication skills in employability. The result of this test also proved that the students' awareness of being confident in communication was also quite high because there was a significant difference between the mean ( $M=4.64$ ) and the test value of 4.0.

The following table summarized EFL students' responses for each item in Communication skills.

Table 5: Summary of participants' responses to each item in Communication skills

Items	Not important and slightly important	Moderately important	Important and very important
1. Listen when the interlocutor talks	0%	0%	100%
2. Use body language to enhance mutual understanding (eye contact, hand gestures...)	1.8%	16.1%	82.2%
3. Be confident in interaction with others	0%	1.8%	98.2%
4. Communicate in a respectful manner	0%	1.8%	98.2%
5. Be able to give and receive feedback during communication	1.8%	12.5%	85.7%
6. Be able to make questions in communication	1.8%	8.9%	89.3%

The results indicate that 6 items belonging to communication skills were highly evaluated by the participants. Through the table, "listen when the interlocutor talks" were chosen as the most important communication skill (100%). The second most chosen skills for important and very important were "be confident in interaction with others" and "communicate in a respectful manner" (98.2%). Whilst "use body language to enhance mutual understanding (eye contact, hand gestures...)" was the least chosen for important and very important (82.2%).

The results were also compatible with data from the interviews, most of the participants considered communication skills one of the important skills in employability [S-E2-Co-72, S-E1-Co-251]

*[...] I think communication skill is very important for any job. The importance of this skill occupies more than 50% in comparison with other skills [S-E2-Co-72]*

*[...] I think it's necessary to communicate with colleagues and managers [S-E1-Co-251]*

Besides, confidence in interaction was appreciated by three out of six participants. They carried out some reasons for their thinking. [S-E1-Co-87] confirmed that confidence was very important for the teaching profession.

*[...] You must be confident when being a teacher [Er-H-Co-54]*

It was believed that confidence was the result of good expertise (*one of his requirements for his tour guide employees*).

The participant continued to emphasize the role of being confident in working by stating:

*[...] It is extremely important to have a confident working style [Er-H-Co-272]*

From the student's perspective, [S-S-Co-59] shared her ideas about the importance of this requirement for an employee. She said:

*[...] I think communication skill is the most important one, [...], (in order to communicate effectively) I think I have to be confident first if I don't believe in myself how the employers can believe me*

From the interviews, both employers and EFL students reported that giving and receiving feedback was necessary for communication, especially the attitudes when getting feedback from the interlocutors. This idea could be found from item 5 in Table 5 above which accounted for 85.7% of agreement from the respondents. In this sense, one employer highlighted positive attitudes when receiving feedback in the workplace.

*[...] The working environment (in a language center where the interviewee works) is for the employees to learn and develop their professional skills [...]. When the headteacher or consultants observe and give comments on one teacher's teaching, he/she is required to accept those comments with positive attitudes [Er-C-Co-75]*

The student-participants realized that they have possessed the communication skill from some courses in their learning program such as English for Communication, English for Presentation, or Public Speaking. One of them highlighted that

*[...] When I'm learning at university, what I feel most confident is my communication skill [...] when I was in high school, teachers just focused on teaching grammar, [...] when I study at university, I have had opportunities to present in front of the class, learn with foreign teachers, and my teachers speak English in class so I can improve my listening and speaking skills a lot (she meant listening and speaking represent communication skills) [S-S-Co-96]*

One out of four participants suggested that teachers should be good at public speaking or communicate well in front of a lot of people [S-E2-Co-26]

Regarding the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, EFL learners believed that they needed to "share life experiences [QQ1-R9]", "listen to the feedback (*from the interlocutors*) [QQ1-R18]", "convince other people through communication [QQ1-R36]", and "communicate well on phones [QQ1-R29]".

In addition, an employer-participant set some standards for his employees who wanted to work in the hospitality industry.

[...] *Then when they apply, they will have part of the interview. In that interview, they will be asked what they have learned at school, and what they have learned about the position [...]. I will ask the interviewees in English, and this required them to have the ability to understand the language. When they respond to me, I want them to express their ideas clearly without being embarrassing* [Er-H-Co-45]

In contrast, students had difficulties in how to improve their public speaking. Student 1 of English Education and Student of English Studies also mentioned the way they did in order to be more confident in public speaking.

[...] *I also try to look into the eyes of people I feel close to, focus on my task, focus on the problem I want the listener to hear, focus on the main content of the presentation then gradually I will get used to it, I will be more confident, like the more I prepare, the more I know what I am talking about, the more confident I will be* [S-E1-Co-88]

However, speaking in public was still a problem for those who were not enough confident. This may cause difficulties for students to apply for a job. Therefore, student of English Studies has mentioned one way to help her improve public speaking skill

[...] *Everything requires confidence, so I am trying to improve my confidence by taking part in the activities at the School of Foreign Languages such as Get together, or the volunteer program of my province association (Green Summer Volunteer Campaign)* [S-S-Co-251]

In summary, communication skills were one of the most necessary skills in employability for many different jobs, especially for EFL students in this study. Most of the responses from the participants through the interviews were consistent with those mentioned in the questionnaire. It was observed that the EFL students had high awareness of communication skills as employability ones, and they knew what skills were required from the employers.

Second, findings of teamwork were found in associated with a One-Sample T-test which was run to check whether the mean score (M=4.63) is different from the test value 4.0. The result showed that a significant difference between the mean (M=4.63) and the test value 4.0 was observed ( $t=3.4$ ,  $df= 55$ ,  $p=.00$ ). This means that EFL students have a quite high awareness of teamwork skills in employability.

Table 6: One-Sample Statistics Test for Teamwork Skills

	<b>T</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>
Teamwork skills	3.409	55	.00	4.63

The One-Sample t-test showed that EFL students have a quite high awareness of respecting the ideas of group members ( $p=.00$  mean that there was a difference between mean  $M=4.63$  and the test value 4.0). Besides, the next three items including cooperating well, communicating successfully, and managing conflict in a group also get high attention from EFL students. The result can be shown through the One-Sample t-test which signifies a quite high degree of awareness of the participants on the mentioned items.

The following table summarized EFL students' responses for each item in Teamwork skills.

Table 7: Summary of Participants' Responses to Each Item in Teamwork Skills

<b>Items</b>	<b>Not important and slightly important</b>	<b>Moderately important</b>	<b>Important and very important</b>
1. Communicate successfully with clear ideas in the group(s)	0%	10.7%	89.3%
2. Manage possible conflict among group members	0%	16.1%	82.2%
3. Respect the ideas of the group's members	0%	1.8%	98.2%
4. Cooperate well with group members	0%	5.4%	94.6%
5. Share common goals with the group members	3.6%	28.6%	67.9%
6. Be able to work with different groups	7.2%	30.4%	62.5%

Obviously, among 6 items in teamwork skills, "respect the ideas of group's members" got the most chosen from the participants for important and very important (94.6%); otherwise, "be able to work with different groups" were least appreciated (62.5%).

Regarding the results from the interviews, one employer highlighted that he wanted his employees to cooperate well with other people in a team to facilitate the task:

[...] *The employees then had to support each other to fasten the task, avoid congestion and be aesthetic* [Er-H-Tw-309]

The result of the interview found clear support that teamwork skills were necessary in the working and learning environment, the student of English Studies has told that

[...] Besides, I often work in groups so working in groups helps me improve myself a lot, I know how to work so that the team always reaches the common goal on time [S-S-Tw-100]

In terms of sharing common goals with group members, a One-Sample t-test was also run to check whether the mean score  $M=3.88$  was different from the test value 4.0. The result showed that no significant difference was observed ( $p=.00$ ), which means that the participants have a high awareness of sharing common goals in team working. In order to support this idea, [S-S-Tw-109] has highlighted the importance of sharing common goals among group members, as well as she mentioned some solutions so that team members could get better results

[...] Well, first of all, the members of the group must know the group's common goal, what they need to aim for so that everyone can move forward. However, in the group, there must be a leader, the better the leader work, the better the group will be [S-S-Tw-109]

A further finding of teamwork skill was from the student of English Teaching Education, who intended to work in the marketing aspect:

[...] I think marketing will require teamwork skills because in marketing, not just one person can make a plan [S-E3-Tw-32]

Apart from the above teamwork skills, the results from the questionnaire also shed light on some other teamwork skills which could help the participants work in teams better through open-ended questions. One student among fifty-six (1.8% of the participants) mentioned that team members had to know how to sum up the ideas of other members to come up with the final decision. Moreover, in some cases, group members had to be able to overdo some of the others' tasks in case there would be not enough time.

After all, most EFL students have a quite high awareness of teamwork skills and they know the importance of the skills in their employability. At the same time, teamwork, in general, was a skill that was required by employers at many different workplaces.

Third, findings on problem-solving skills, in order to evaluate the EFL students' awareness of the problem-solving skills, a One-Sample t-test was run to check whether the mean score  $M=4.29$  was different from the test value 4.0. The result showed that there was a significant difference between the mean score and the test value, which signify a quite high degree of awareness of problem-solving skills ( $t=5.2$ ,  $df=55$ ,  $p=.00$ ).

Table 8: One-Sample Statistics Test for Problem-solving Skills

	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Score
Problem-solving skills	5.257	55	.00	4.29

Most of the participants have a quite high awareness of problem-solving skills ( $p=.00$  mean that there was a difference between the mean score and the test value 4.0). It was reported that EFL students need to prepare observational skills in solving problems. Through the quantitative analysis, it was concluded that EFL students have quite high attention on observing the problems before going to the decisions ( $M=4.55$ ,  $p=.00$ ).

The following table summarized EFL students' responses for each item in Problem-solving skills.

Table 9: Summary of Participants' Responses to Each Item in Problem-solving Skills

Items	Not important and slightly important	Moderately important	Important and very important
1. Think outside of the box	0%	10.7%	89.3%
2. Be able to solve problems in any circumstances	0%	19.6%	80.4%
3. Be able to make decisions	0%	7.1%	92.8%
4. Be able to take risks	3.6%	12.5%	83.9%
5. Have critical thinking skills	0%	5.4%	94.6%
6. Have observational skills	0%	3.6%	96.4%
7. Be able to solve problems creatively	1.8%	19.6%	78.5%

It could be noted that these 7 items in problem-solving skills were highly chosen for being important in employability. Among these 7 items, "have observational skills" were the most chosen for important and very important (96.4%). However, "be able to solve problems creatively" was the least important among the problem-solving skills (78.5%). Concerning the open-ended questions for further ideas from the participants about problem-solving skills, 1 among 56 EFL students (1.8%) mentioned that "solve problems quickly and accurately" was necessary for employability.

As collected from the interviews, student one of English Teaching Education mentioned that

*[...] At that time, I thought that it was necessary to have problem analysis skills, when I found that my children did not understand a grammar problem, I would pay attention to him and analyze why he did not understand such things. I have to explain it in another way that is easier to understand [S-E1-Ps-54]*

In terms of critical thinking skills, most of the participants mentioned the skills as one of the most important skills in employability. The One-Sample t-test showed that there was a difference between the mean score ( $M=4.41$ ) and the test value of 4.0. That signified a quite high degree of awareness of the participants on the skill. In the interview, student two of English Education mentioned that he needed critical thinking skills in his current and future job

*[...] If you could not make your students feel interesting, then you have to ask yourself a lot of questions, that how to make it interesting, the focus of the content, not going out of control, how to bring life experiences into lessons that make lessons interesting [S-E2-Ps-47]*

Most of the EFL students who majored in English Teacher Education thought that problem-solving skills were one of the most important to be a good English teacher. They also suggested some methods they thought they might use to solve problems in the classroom:

*[...] When the teacher realizes that the students do not want to study, or do not like the activities, I observe that some teachers change the different activities, such as using songs to teach. For example, when the students do not pay attention to the lessons, the teacher then plays a song relating to the lessons [S-E1-Ps-141]*

The above extracts helped to clarify the creativity in problem-solving skills. In this skill, the One-Sample T-test showed that there was no difference between the mean score  $M=3.98$  and the test value 4.0. This means that the participants have little awareness of creativity in problem-solving skills. In fact, one of the participants claimed that it was not good to solve problems creatively in any circumstances.

Through the qualitative analysis, most of the problems solving skills observed similar awareness of the participants involved, including making decisions, thinking outside of the box, and taking a risk. A One-Sample t-test was run to check whether the mean score of these items was different from the test value. The result showed that there was a significant difference between the mean and test value 4.0, which signified quite high awareness of the participants.

In the first interview, student 1 of English Education said that EFL teachers should solve problems that accidentally happened in class [S-E1-Ps-102]. To be specific, student 3 of English Teaching Education also highlighted that quick problem-solving skill was important in her job

*[...] I think I need the skill to handle quick situations, I also encounter that kind of situation very often, for example, when I don't know, or a student asks me a word I don't know because there are words I don't know. Then I will ask the best student in the class to answer if he or she does not know if I will give them an assignment or task at home, or a certain game that uses that word [S-E3-Ps-70]*

From the viewpoint of English Teaching Education students, it was observed that problem-solving skills could vary in different situations and it required flexibility and adaptability. Students could prepare and practice problem-solving skills at school or by their part-time jobs. This fact showed that students could benefit from their jobs in the past and lead to better job performance in the future

*[...] If you can do this position well, then you will be able to handle all situations in life because you can calm your mind then, you're always happy, people around you will have a better impression on you [Er-H-Ps-281]*

The employer of the hotel and restaurant also revealed that having employees who were good at problem-solving might help the enterprise develop. This also meant that the employer really wanted the students to be prepared with good problem-solving skills.

*[...] If we want to have a successful business, we must have a good staff who has good problem-solving and good behavior [Er-H-Ps-301]*

Furthermore, from the questionnaire, the participants also revealed some different problem-solving skills as their other responses for the open-ended questions. The participants thought that they should prepare with reading and analyzing skills before solving a problem, as well as it was necessary to make a backup plan for a problem. Moreover, EFL students thought that they need to realize and accept the mistakes in problem-solving in order to improve the way to solve problems in any circumstances.

In the interviews, 3 out of 4 students major in English Teacher Education, therefore those students intended to work as an English teacher after graduation. Most of these 3 students wanted to work as English teachers at an English center instead of at a high school, due to a number some reasons. Student 1 of English Education has reported English teachers also need to have critical thinking skills as one of the problem-solving skills in classrooms



[...] *it must be based on the level of each student in the class. When students are too weak, we must have some simple activities for them. If there is a better student in the class than the others, then we can create more activities, preparing some other lessons for the students, in case the student completes the task, then we have to give another task for students to do* [S-E1-Ps-76]

As reported from the interviews, two out of 4 students have been working as tour guides. However, the male student of English Teaching Education has mentioned that tour guide brought him lots of interesting skills, experience, and knowledge, as well as he highlighted those problem-solving skills that were necessary to be a tour guide

[...] *If you decide to work as a tour guide, you must learn and memorize all the things of the place you have to present, if you forget it, you will calm down through those parts, and add other content. When I have a chance, I will be back and say Oh I forgot to say that..., add more information into that. Or when I go to another place, I will link that location to what I forgot, so I won't be embarrassed* [S-E2-Ps-51]

From the interviews, one student-interviewee out of four participants was working as a translator for an office. Being a translator or interpreter required not only good language use but also the ability to understand the context and create good meaning in the target language, as well as problem-solving skills. The student of English Teaching Education used to work as a free-lance interpreter reported that

[...] *I think that listening and speaking English skills are very important, besides, you have to listen and speak English quickly, quick listening, quick translation, and understanding. In addition to that skill, you must prepare all the problems that could be encountered, such as when I do not understand a problem, I have to ask again, I must not translate incorrectly, something I don't know, I have to ask it so that the person can explain it carefully to get the idea* [S-E1-Ps-282]

Taken together, these findings from the One sample t-test and interviews have proved that problem-solving skills were important in many different careers that hired EFL students.

Apart from eight groups of employability skills listed in the questionnaire, the participants also highlighted some other skills necessary for employability, which are discussed in the section below.

The first skill to be mentioned is relationship management skills. This skill was not listed in the framework to be used in the questionnaire; however, this skill was mentioned several times in the interviews. The skill was demonstrated by students of English Education, a student of English Studies, as well as the employer of an English center [S-E1-Rm, S-S-Rm, Er-C-Rm].

After being analyzed, the result found evidence to prove that relationship management skills were also very important in establishing a good working environment. Relationship management skills could be seen as both negative and positive skills. First, relationship management skill was considered as a skill from which an employee will benefit from having a good relationship with the employers. A student of English Teacher Education has mentioned that

[...] *Nowadays the working environment is very competitive, there are fewer targets for teachers who graduate from university, I think that some teachers who have relationships with the principal or recruiters will be able to be chosen than those who do not have a relationship or do not know the employer well* [S-E1-Rm-232]

On the other hand, the employer of an English center mentioned that relationship management skill was important in terms of making good relationship in a job. Specifically in her center, it was necessary for a teacher to make and maintain a relationship with students and other staff.

[...] *I can see the communication skills of teachers, staff, and consultants. It is very important for them to be sociable, to maintain the relationship with students and the way they consult for the students* [Er-C-Rm-90]

A further finding related to relationship management was from a student of English Studies. The student mentioned that to be working in the Insurance service, it was necessary to make relationships with many people to gain benefits from the customers. Moreover, relationships with colleagues and customers were also important.

[...] *The most important thing is having many relationships to make it easier for our job* [S-S-Rm-360]

[...] *In addition, we must have many social relationships, we have to be flexible, we do not be so rigid in communication* [S-S-Rm-111]

After all, relationship management skill is one of the optional skills that could be used in some specific circumstances. In this study, relationship management skills could be known as both positive and negative skills. Therefore, EFL students should know what relationship they have to manage in employability.

Besides, the employer of the hotel and restaurant required tour guide to have good health, as well as knowledge of health care and first aid kits

[...] *Next is the position of tour guide, it requires you to be healthy because we have to go with customers on a journey, maybe not too long, but it requires you to have the skill to endure drunk driving, for example, and you are not afraid of getting black, white girls when traveling will affect your skin [Er-H-Os-69]*

From the interviews, student 2 of English Education has mentioned a skill that he thought new graduates need when applying for a job.

[...] *skills to pay attention and do the smallest work so that others can recognize you as good staff. For example, when I graduated from college, I had an outstanding degree but didn't do the easiest jobs, but those jobs helped me a lot when I started a certain job, others would appreciate it a lot [S-E2-Os-68]*

For the banking industry, this student also reported that it was a very hard job that required motivation to work, because *"There are some people who work have to run a lot of sales because when we have a lot of sales, we have more motivation in work, our salary is also higher because both of them are proportional to each other [S-S-O-316]"*.

In relation to the open-ended questions for more different ideas about employability skills, there were 3 participants who provided plenty of viewpoints such as *"have passion with the job"*, *"choose the appropriate job with the own interests or characteristics"*. The participant also claimed that *"having an impact on another person"* was necessary for employability due to the fact that it would help the employees to have a good impression on the others and it would bring benefits to the job.

In brief, besides those aforementioned employability skills, the participants provided different ideas on the skills that they think they have prepared in order to apply for a job in the 21st century.

### Discussion

To answer the first research question, 56 valid questionnaires and 4 out of 6 interviews were analyzed. The participants were all EFL students, and the result has reported 12 employability skills that EFL students think they need in the 21st century. The employability skills included communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprising, planning and organizing, self-management, learning, technology, job interview, language use, relationship management, and public speaking skills.

For the second research question, 2 employers out of 6 participants were interviewed to find out the answers. The results presented that the employers required 9 different employability skills from their employees. The skill requirements comprised of initiative and enterprising, problem solving, self-learning, job interview, self-management, technology, language use, teamwork, and communication skills.

Most of the related studies investigated the necessary employability skills for graduate students in different majors. In the research of Nguyen (2011) about Vietnamese students' employability skills, the author conducted a study on International University (IU) undergraduates. The result of that study found out that IU students had higher competencies in communication and the use of resources. Similarly, the current study also found out that communication skills were among the most important skills toward students' employment. Most of the participants in the study mentioned communication skills as one of their first groups of skills that need to be improved. Another research that figured out the important types of employability skills was the study of Suarta et al. (2017). This study highlighted that communication skills, problem-solving, decision-making, and teamwork skills were among the most important employability skills.

The related studies discussed employability skills of undergraduates in technology (Gill, 2018), engineer (Husain et al., 2010), manufacturing industry (Wei Chan et al., 2018). The mentioned studies have investigated the requirements of the employers for graduated students on employability skills. Also, the present study has examined the importance and if the employability skills met the requirements of the employers.

Looking closely at individual categories of employability skills. Compared to the framework for transversal competencies of Care and Luo (2016), there are some similar skills such as the ability to learn, flexibility and adaptability, self-awareness. However, the study has categorized the domains into different sub-skills which highlight specific skills for EFL students in their employability. In this framework, self-management skills were divided into self-discipline, self-awareness, self-motivation, and self-respect. The result of the current study reported self-management skills such as time management, ability to set own schedule, self-disciplinary, strong commitment, emotional management, and confidence in idea creation. In the study, there was no evidence showing that the participants have risk-taking skills or integrity in jobs. In addition, the present study has found a skill that is not much mentioned in the related studies, which is job interview skills. To be specific, job interview skills are those which students need to prepare before going to a job interview such as writing a curriculum vitae (CV), how to create a good first impression with the employers. In some research, there were also some terms called application skills which underlining the similar meaning. This skill is close to communication skills at the interview stage, which allows the students to stand out compared to other candidates in the same vacancy (Ting et al., 2017).

Regarding technology skills, since the 21st century is the century of industry 4.0, therefore it means that employees in the 21st century have to perform tasks with technology in the global market. In the study, most of the students reported that they need to prepare information technology skills for their jobs to meet the requirements of modern jobs. Specifically, EFL students mostly thought that they have prepared themselves with some basic IT skills such as Microsoft skills or using the Internet. In contrast, employers require them to have specific technical skills to work for in the businesses such as using an application or handling common technical errors. Therefore, EFL students recognized that they could learn those skills through practicing and working. In this study, the students recognized how to attain technology skills in order not to go behind the society. That result is close to a study of Ra et al. (2019), who mentioned that technology can help to reduce the skill gaps in employment.

In the case of problem-solving skills, most of the participants and employers mentioned the skills as one of the most important employability skills. Problem-solving skills happened in every job, not only jobs using English but also any other jobs. Towards EFL students' preparations, they thought that quick problem-solving skills were important in any job, including English teachers, tour guides, and hospitality services. Similarly, the employers highly suggested students be flexible and adaptable to the situations at the workplace. In this type of skill, the employers' discussion on problem-solving skills was different from other studies in terms of how to be master problem-solving skills. In the present study, the employers reminded students to perceive problem-solving skills by taking part in the real situations held by the real people at the workplace. In another study by Woods et al. (1997), problem-solving skills were developed through in-class "building" activities.

In the case of communication skills, the result of the research revealed four sub-skills, which are self-confidence, receptiveness to feedback, body language, and listening skill. Whilst UNESCO's framework divided communication skills groups into a number of facets: listen effectively, communicate accurately and concisely, effective oral communication, communicate pleasantly and professionally, effective written communication, ask good questions, and communicate using social media. The employers also thought that communication is the top skill which is close to the findings of the researcher in Malaysia (Singh & Singh, 2008) and Thailand (Pattanapichet & Chinokul, 2011). Also, the employers' recognition of communication and language proficiency is similar to the results conducted by Young and Schartner (2014) who believed that the aim of language learning is communicational competencies.

The study mentioned relationship management as one of the factors of social competencies. The findings of the study figured those students should know how to manage the relationship in both positive and negative ways. The recognition of EFL students about relationship management was different from those mentioned in the article of the University of Florida Training and Organizational Development about Social Competency and Relationship Management. The author of the article mentioned relationship management as one of the emotional intelligences and it is described as the best predictor for a successful career. Whilst one of the participants in the current study highlighted that having relationship management with the employers could help to promote and maintain the job well.

On the other hand, there are some differences between the current study and previous research. The outstanding of this study is about the background of participants. The participants involved in the study are EFL students majoring in English Education or English Studies and the employers who hire these students as their employees. Most of the previous studies investigated students who are from economy or engineering.

It was gratifying to find out that there was a strong convergence of EFL students' and employers' perceptions about the importance of the different employability skills. Interestingly, both EFL students and employers highlighted similar employability skills in the similar field of employment, identified as communication skills, problem-solving skills, self-management skills, or learning skills. It appears that EFL students have been aware of the employability skills that are required by employers. They also share similar opinions of the importance of employability skills with employers of the enterprises. It could be clear to see that EFL students have a good understanding of the requirements of the enterprises so there was less mismatch between EFL students' preparation and employers' expectation on the employability skills.

### **Conclusion**

From the study, the result has shown that there were a lot of necessary employability skills for EFL students in the 21st century. The employability skills were categorized into eight main domains, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative, enterprising, planning and organizing, self-management, learning, and technology skills. Looking close to the answer to each research question.

For the first research question, the EFL students have voted such skills as critical thinking, problem-solving, initiative and enterprising, flexibility and adaptability, self-learning, self-management, job interview, and technology as their necessary employability skills. In terms of interpersonal skills, EFL students listed some important employability skills such as communication, teamwork, public speaking, and relationship management. For the second research question, the employers highly required EFL students to have such employability skills as problem-solving, initiative and enterprising, flexibility and adaptability, self-learning, self-management, job interview, technology, and language use skills. Furthermore, the employers highlighted the importance of teamwork and communication skills in employment.

In general, the employability skills for EFL students were rated at a very high level. This shows that all employers, especially employers in human society that hire EFL students placing employability skills as must be owned by all EFL graduates to enable them to compete in the global market. The government and institutions should also enhance the employability skills of the EFL students through the curriculum and the professional development of lecturers. Obviously, there should be a mission about the training knowledge and skills for specific jobs in Vietnam, and in the Mekong Delta. Investment in education is an investment in development (Psacharopoulos, 1994), therefore the investment for students in enhancing employability skills is considered as an investment for their future with a good recruitment process and good job performance.

### **Recommendations**

The major purpose of this study was to find out employability skills for EFL students in the 21st century and if there was any mismatch between students' preparation and employers' requirements. There will be mentioned some pedagogical implications for further study relating to this current topic. A number of EFL students have mentioned some employability skills that they think they need for their job in the future. However, it was said that they have never learned any of the skills in the curriculum, especially skills for a specific job. As a result, this research recommends teaching some job-specific knowledge and skills as a subject. Specifically, the subjects could be included in ESP courses for students majoring in the hospitality industry or tourism. It was not only technical English but also skills which students can apply in their expected jobs.

For future research, it is highly recommended to support EFL students with sufficient employability skills consistent with what they have learned at school. There was a fact that students are aware of the employability skills from what they have experienced. The findings of this study suggest that it is important for universities to put programs in place to ensure that EFL students can develop their employability skills. For students who learn English as a foreign language, the use of English should not only be included in language classes but also extended to other majors. Moreover, lecturers can also play an important role in identifying students' strengths and encouraging them to develop their skills. This would be applicable to students who want to find out their strengths so that they can figure out their favorite kinds of jobs.

From the study, it is found that the EFL students perceived themselves as having the necessary skills required by the employers. However, it is still premature to conclude that EFL students have high opportunities to be employed by those employers. It is a fact that employers have their own way to assess job candidates in their selection process. Therefore, the university programs should emphasize instilling employability skills in students, especially EFL students, so that they can be ready for the job application.

### **Limitations**

The work really has some limitations that should be mentioned. First of all, there was a time constraint in the process of conducting the study. The study was just conducted in 6 months so there was not enough time to acknowledge all of the necessary analysis.

Secondly, there was an insufficient sample size for statistical measurement. The larger sample was, the more precise the study would be. Therefore, there should be more participants involved in the interview. Specifically, more EFL students who majored in English Studies or Translators and Interpreters should be invited to do the research. In the present study, only three students of English Education and one student of English Studies were interviewed so the information was not diverse enough. It was a fact that the mindset between English education students and English studies students was different. Therefore, how they prepared for future jobs was also different because there might be a conflict arising from personal characteristics. Thus, because the time to conduct the study was in the summer, it was difficult in looking for participants who were students. Consequently, future studies should address the problem with more participants involved in the study in order to enhance the validity of the study. In addition, more employers from translator and other jobs should be interviewed. Due to the fact that there were just two employers involved in the study, there might be not enough requirements from many different employers at different enterprises. Also, the limitations were due to a bias from personal and institutional issues.

Thus, more job-related skills should be discussed in the study. As to be known, EFL students might work in many different places that require English. Therefore, they should prepare themselves with various employability skills to fit the requirements of the workplace.

Finally, the study is limited in the context of a city. The study should be conducted in more provinces in the Mekong Delta in order to ensure the diversity of the participants and reliability of the data. For this reason, more participants in different regions of the Mekong Delta should be involved in future studies.

### Authorship Contribution Statement

Phan: Interpretation, writing, editing/reviewing, supervision, final approval, secure funding. Nguyen: Conceptualization, design, data analysis, drafting manuscript. Nguyen: Data collection, writing, critical revision of manuscript, technical/ material support.

### References

- Alismail, H., & McGuire, P. (2015). 21st century standards and curriculum: current research and practice. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(6), 150-155. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1083656.pdf>
- Care, E., & Luo, R. (2016). *Assessment of transversal competencies: Policy and practice in the Asia-Pacific region*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- Confederation of British Industry. (2009). *Future fit: preparing graduates for the world of work*. Universities UK. <http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/69384>
- Cotton, K. (1993). *Developing employability skills. School improvement research series, close-up #15*. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. <https://bit.ly/3puj3oD>
- Department of Education, Science, and Training. (2004). *Employability skills. Final Report: Development of a Strategy to Support the Universal Recognition and Recording of Employability Skills*. <https://bit.ly/3CcATBW>
- Fandino, Y. P. (2013). 21st century skills and the English foreign language classroom: A call for more awareness in Colombia. *Gist Education and Learning Research Journal*, 7, 190-208. <https://bit.ly/3CcATBW>
- Gill, R. (2018). Building employability skills for higher education students: An Australian example. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 9(1), 84-92. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2018vol9no1art739>
- Han, T., & Aybirdi, N. (2016). *21st Century Skills for EFL Learners*. Current Trends in ELT.
- Hanushek, E. A., & Woessmann, L. (2021). Education and economic growth. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Economics and Finance*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190625979.013.651>
- Husain, M. Y., Mokhtar, S. B., Ahmad, A. A., & Mustapha, R. (2010). Importance of employability skills from employers' perspective. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 7, 430-438. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.10.059>
- Keller, S., Parker, C. M., & Chan, C. (2011). Employability skills: Student perceptions of an is final year capstone subject. *Innovation in Teaching and Learning in Information and Computer Sciences*, 10(2), 4-15. <https://doi.org/10.11120/ital.2011.10020004>
- Knight, P. T., & Yorke, M. (2003). Employability and good learning in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8(1), 3-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356251032000052294>
- Lamb, S., Maire, Q., & Doecke, E. (2017). *Key skills for the 21st century: An evidence-based review*. Victoria University. Centre for International Research on Education Systems.
- Larson, L. C., & Miller, T. N. (2011). 21st century skills: Prepare students for the future. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 47(3), 121-123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2011.10516575>
- Nguyen, D. K. (2018). A new application of Raymond Padilla's unfolding matrix in framing qualitative data and the follow-up activities for educational research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7(1-8). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918786820>
- Nguyen, T. M. (2011). Vietnamese student employability skills. *International Education Studies*, 4(4), 175-191. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v4n4p175>
- Padilla, R. (1994). The unfolding matrix: a technique for qualitative data acquisition and analyses. *Studies of Qualitative Methodology*, 4, 273-285.
- Pattanapichet, F., & Chinokul, S. (2011). Competencies needed in oral communication in English among Thai undergraduate public relations students: A substantial gap between expectations and reality. *RELC Journal*, 42(2), 187-202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688211401253>
- Psacharopoulos, G. (1994). Returns to investment in Education: A global update. *World Development*, 22(9), 1325-1343. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750x\(94\)90007-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750x(94)90007-8)
- Ra, S., Shrestha, U., Khatiwada, S., Yoon, S. W., & Kwon, K. (2019). The rise of Technology and impact on skills. *International Journal of Training Research*, 17(sup1), 26-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14480220.2019.1629727>
- Saad, M. S. M., & Majid, I. A. (2014). Employability skills. *Global Journal of Engineering Education*, 16(3), 110-115. <https://bit.ly/3MctMOM>

- Schooley, R. (2017). *Why are soft skills missing in today's applicants?* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Murray State University. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/143838367.pdf>
- Singh, G., & Singh, S. (2008). Malaysian graduates' employability skills. *Unitar E-Journal*, 4(1), 14-44. <https://bit.ly/3hvJLsQ>
- Suarta, M., Suwintana, K., Sudhana, F. P., & Hariyanti, N. K. (2017). Employability skills required by the 21st century workplace: A literature review of labor market demand. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 102, 337-342. <https://doi.org/10.2991/ictvt-17.2017.58>
- Ting, S., Marzuki, E., Chuah, K., Misieng, J., & Jerome, C. (2017). Employers' views on the importance of English proficiency and communication skill for employability in Malaysia. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7(2), 315-327. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v7i2.8132>
- Tomlinson, M. (2012). Graduate Employability: A review of conceptual and empirical themes. *Higher Education Policy*, 25(4), 407-431. <https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2011.26>
- Tran, J. (2012). Vietnamese higher education and the issue of enhancing graduate employability. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 3(1), 2-16. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2012vol3no1art554>
- Truong, H. T. T., Laura, R. S., & Shaw, K. (2016). New insights for soft skills development in Vietnamese business schools: Defining essential soft skills for maximizing graduates' career success. *International Journal of Industrial and Systems Engineering*, 10(6), 1857-1863. <https://bit.ly/35KDS8A>
- Wei Chan, S., F. Ahmad, M., Zaman, I., & Shin Ko, W. (2018). Employers' perception on important employability skills in the manufacturing industry. *International Journal of Engineering & Technology*, 7(2.29), 170. <https://doi.org/10.14419/ijet.v7i2.29.13311>
- Woods, D. R., Hrymak, A. N., Marshall, R. R., Wood, P. E., Crowe, C. M., Hoffman, T. W., Wright, J. D., Taylor, P. A., Woodhouse, K. A., & Bouchard, C. G. K. (1997). Developing problem-solving skills: The McMaster Problem Solving Program. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 86(2), 75-91. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2168-9830.1997.tb00270.x>
- Young, T. J., & Schartner, A. (2014). The effects of cross-cultural communication education on international students' adjustment and adaptation. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 35(6), 547-562. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2014.884099>