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THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Abstract. *This article examines the impact of English language proficiency on an individual's professional development, competitiveness in the labor market, employment opportunities, professional communication, and participation in international work environments. The relevance of the study is determined by the fact that, amid globalization, digital transformation, the expansion of remote work, and the growing scope of international professional cooperation, language competence is increasingly evolving from a basic communicative skill into a strategic form of professional capital.*

The study employs methods including the analysis of academic literature, comparative analysis, content analysis, and the systematization of secondary data. Research conducted by the OECD on adult skills, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) developed by the Council of Europe, materials published by the British Council, and empirical studies examining the relationship between English proficiency and employability were analyzed.

The findings indicate that a high level of English proficiency is an important factor in facilitating access to professional information, participation in international teams, professional networking, continuing professional development, and career mobility. However, English proficiency alone does not guarantee professional success; its economic and professional value is greater when combined with an individual's core professional competencies. The article provides recommendations for shifting English language education from general language instruction toward a model focused on the development of professionally oriented language competence.

Keywords: *English language, professional development, professional competence, employability, labor market, language competence, human capital, international labor market, CEFR, professional communication.*

INTRODUCTION

The labor market of the twenty-first century is undergoing fundamental changes under the influence of technological advancement, globalization, digitalization, and the deepening of the international division of labor. Today, the professional value of a specialist is determined not only by a degree or specialized professional knowledge. Modern employers increasingly expect an integrated set of skills that combines professional knowledge with communication competence, digital literacy, problem-solving, teamwork, adaptability, and foreign language proficiency.

Within this context, English plays a particularly important role. English is one of the major means of communication in international scientific communication, business, technology, higher education, tourism, diplomacy, and the digital economy. Therefore, English proficiency is no longer simply an “additional language” for modern professionals; rather, it serves as a means of accessing professional knowledge and opportunities.

The results of the OECD’s 2023 Survey of Adult Skills demonstrate that education and skills are independently associated with labor market outcomes. Employees with higher levels of skills had substantially higher median hourly earnings than those with lower levels of skills: according to OECD data, the median earnings of highly skilled workers were approximately USD 31 per hour, compared with USD 18 for workers with lower skill levels. Although this indicator does not directly measure English proficiency, it demonstrates the economic value of measurable skills in the labor market.

The distinctive feature of language competence is that it can also expand an individual’s ability to apply other skills. For example, a highly skilled IT specialist can broaden the scope of their knowledge by reading international documentation, communicating with foreign colleagues, participating in international projects, and using global professional networks. In such circumstances, English is not itself the professional knowledge, but rather a “mediating competence” that expands the ability to apply that knowledge.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), developed by the Council of Europe, describes language proficiency across six levels, from A1 to C2. An important feature of this framework is that it does not view language merely as a collection of grammatical rules; instead, it assesses the ability to perform real-world communicative tasks.

Therefore, the concept of “knowing English” is not sufficiently precise on its own. From the perspective of professional development, the key issue is not simply how well an individual knows the language, but **how effectively they can use it to perform professional tasks**.

This issue is also highly relevant to Uzbekistan. The integration of higher education graduates into the labor market, the development of modern competencies, and the alignment of educational programs with employers’ needs are becoming increasingly important areas of public policy. The fact that more than 320,000 students are expected to graduate from higher education institutions in Uzbekistan in 2026 further increases the importance of strengthening graduates’ competitiveness.

In addition, within Uzbekistan’s integration into the international IT-enabled services (ITES) market, World Bank-supported projects identify communication, computer, and language skills, including English, as important areas of development. These projects aim to prepare thousands of young people with the communication and language skills required by the ITES sector.

These circumstances define the central problem of the study: **through what mechanisms does English proficiency influence an individual’s professional development, and under what conditions is this impact strengthened?**

The aim of the study is to systematically analyze the relationship between English language competence and professional development based on existing academic research and to develop practical recommendations for higher education and professional training systems.

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does English proficiency affect employability, that is, the ability to obtain employment and maintain sustainable participation in the labor market?
2. How does English contribute to the development of professional knowledge and other competencies?
3. How does English proficiency influence career advancement and international professional mobility?
4. Is the economic value of language competence the same across all occupations?
5. What model of integrating English language education with professional development would be most effective in higher education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concepts of English Proficiency and Employability

Employability is a multidimensional concept referring to an individual's ability to enter the labor market, obtain employment, perform effectively in the workplace, develop their skills, and successfully transition to another job when necessary.

In recent years, the concept of employability has expanded beyond simply having a job to include an individual's ability to continuously update and strengthen their professional capital. In a systematic literature review published in 2024, Scandurra and colleagues analyzed 87 academic studies on employability programs in higher education. The authors demonstrate that universities prepare students for the labor market through various approaches, including internships, professional skills development, career planning, and networking.

This approach is directly relevant to English proficiency as well. Language competence can serve as a means of demonstrating other employability skills. For example, a student may possess strong analytical thinking skills, but if they are unable to express their ideas in English during an international job interview, their actual opportunities in the labor market may be limited.

Therefore, it is insufficient to regard English merely as a “soft skill” or a basic communication skill. In certain professions, it has become a functional component of professional activity.

English as a Component of Human Capital

According to human capital theory, knowledge, skills, and competencies are considered forms of capital that increase an individual's future economic and professional opportunities.

Language can also be regarded as a form of such capital. However, unlike many other skills, the value of language capital is often reflected in its ability to “activate” other forms of knowledge.

For example, an engineer who can read an international research article on a new technology, use software documentation, or conduct technical negotiations with a foreign manufacturer can apply their professional knowledge more effectively. In such circumstances, English does not replace engineering expertise; rather, it expands the scope in which that expertise can be applied.

OECD data on adult skills also demonstrate a strong relationship between skills and labor market outcomes. The research indicates that employees with higher levels of skills have advantages in terms of employment and earnings.

From this perspective, English can also be regarded as a **transferable skill**, that is, a competence that can be applied across different occupations.

English Proficiency and Employment

A study conducted in Malaysia by Kamlun, Jawing, and Gansau examined the relationship between English proficiency and graduates' employability. The study analyzed graduates of a Malaysian university and their results on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). The authors emphasize that the relationship between English proficiency and employability may vary depending on occupational and national contexts.

Similarly, a study by Hiew and colleagues analyzed data from 3,918 science graduates who completed their studies at a Malaysian public university between 2015 and 2017. The study examined the relationship between employment status, English language course outcomes, and MUET scores using statistical methods.

Another study focusing on social science graduates analyzed data from 7,025 graduates to examine the relationship between English proficiency and employability.

These studies provide an important methodological conclusion: a relationship between English proficiency and employment may exist, but it would be inappropriate to interpret it as a uniform and universal cause-and-effect relationship across all occupations.

English Proficiency and Earnings

The impact of language skills on earnings has also been observed in international research.

A study published in 2025 based on data from the European Adult Education Survey examined the relationship between immigrants' proficiency in the local language and English and their earnings. The findings indicate that, in some medium-skilled occupations, proficiency in both the local language and English has a positive effect on earnings, while in white-collar occupations, English proficiency alone is significantly associated with higher earnings.

These findings demonstrate that the value of language competence depends on the **professional context**. In occupations involving international clients, foreign partners,

international standards, or global information flows, the economic value of English may be higher.

At the same time, it would be scientifically inaccurate to conclude that English proficiency is the sole cause of higher salaries. Individuals with strong English skills may also have higher levels of education, greater social capital, stronger digital skills, or international experience. Therefore, it is important to **distinguish between correlation and causation**.

CEFR and Professional Language Competence

The CEFR describes language proficiency across the levels A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2. One of the framework's major advantages is that it allows "language proficiency" to be understood not as an abstract concept, but through communicative activities.

From the perspective of professional development, B2 and higher levels may be particularly important. However, a certificate level should not be treated as a complete equivalent of professional competence.

For example, it cannot automatically be assumed that a person with C1-level general English proficiency will understand medical terminology, financial reports, or engineering documentation at a professional level. Therefore, **English for Specific Purposes (ESP)** – English designed for particular professions or fields—is increasingly important in contemporary professional language education.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is theoretical and analytical in nature and focuses on examining the relationship between English language competence and professional development based on secondary academic data.

The following methods were employed:

1. Systematic literature review.

Academic studies addressing English language proficiency, employability, professional development, labor market outcomes, language skills, and earnings were analyzed.

2. Comparative analysis.

The value of English in the labor market was compared across different countries and professional groups.

3. Content analysis.

Key concepts related to English proficiency were identified in academic articles, reports published by international organizations, and institutional materials.

4. Conceptual synthesis.

Based on existing research, the mechanisms through which English influences professional development were systematized.

The conceptual model of the analysis can be expressed as follows:

English language competence → access to information → professional communication → international networking → new professional opportunities → career mobility → professional development.

In this model, English is not viewed as the sole direct cause of professional outcomes, but as a factor connecting several professional mechanisms.

In accordance with academic research ethics, statistical results were not artificially generated where new empirical data were unavailable. All figures presented are based on published data from the relevant sources.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

English Expands Access to Professional Information

The analysis of existing research shows that one of the most important functions of English in professional development is expanding access to professional information.

A significant proportion of today's scientific and professional information is produced and disseminated in English. Access to academic articles, technical documentation, international standards, professional courses, webinars, conferences, online platforms, and expert networks is directly influenced by language competence.

As a result, professionals who do not know English may access part of the available professional knowledge through intermediaries, translations, or secondary sources. Professionals who know English, by contrast, can access primary sources directly.

This phenomenon can be described as **reducing information asymmetry**. Information asymmetry refers to a situation in which market participants do not have equal access to necessary information. English can serve as an instrument for reducing this gap.

English Strengthens Professional Communication

Professional development depends not only on individual knowledge but also on the ability to communicate that knowledge to others.

In international companies, meetings, emails, professional presentations, negotiations, reports, and project management may be conducted in English.

Accordingly, the following skills are particularly important in professional English:

- writing professional emails;
- delivering presentations;
- conducting negotiations;
- expressing opinions in meetings;
- understanding technical or academic texts;
- writing reports;
- presenting one's competencies during job interviews;
- collaborating in international teams.

Thus, grammatical accuracy alone is not sufficient. Professional English should constitute **task-oriented communicative competence**.

English Expands Professional Networking

Networking is the process of developing professional relationships and collaborative networks. In the modern labor market, some professional opportunities emerge precisely through such networks.

English can serve as a primary means of communication at international conferences, on LinkedIn, in professional forums, academic communities, international projects, and remote-work platforms.

From this perspective, English is a factor that expands an individual's **professional social capital**.

As language proficiency increases, so do communicative opportunities. A person at B1 level may be able to participate in basic professional communication, whereas a professional at B2–C1 level can participate more independently in complex negotiations, presentations, and academic or professional discussions.

English Strengthens International Labor Mobility

Labor mobility refers to a professional's ability to move to another company, region, country, or segment of the labor market.

The growth of international companies and the expansion of remote work are reducing the extent to which geographical boundaries limit professional opportunities.

The EF English Proficiency Index 2025 is based on data from 2.2 million test takers across 123 countries and regions. This demonstrates the substantial global demand for learning and assessing English proficiency.

However, this index should not be interpreted as a direct measure of labor market outcomes. It reflects the global distribution of English proficiency rather than employment outcomes themselves.

The Relationship Between English Proficiency and Professional Development Varies by Occupation

An important finding of the analysis is that the economic and professional value of English is not the same across all occupations.

English Strengthens Technical Competencies

One of the most important yet frequently overlooked functions of English is its ability to support the development of other competencies.

For example, if a programmer has strong English skills, they can:

- learn new technology documentation more quickly;
- use Stack Overflow, GitHub, and other professional resources more effectively;
- communicate with international colleagues;
- study original sources concerning technical problems;
- access a broader range of vacancies in the international labor market.

The same mechanism applies to academic research. Researchers with English proficiency can read international publications directly, participate in international conferences, apply for grant programs, and present their findings to international audiences.

English Has an Indirect Impact on Career Advancement

Career advancement is generally determined by a combination of factors, including professional knowledge, experience, leadership, communication, performance, social capital, and opportunities within an organization.

English can strengthen some of these factors.

For example, when selecting an employee for an international project, if two candidates have comparable professional competencies, an individual who can communicate effectively with an international team may have an advantage.

Thus, English often functions as a **career accelerator**, enabling existing professional competencies to be demonstrated more quickly and across a wider range of contexts.

DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis make it possible to explain the importance of English in professional development at three main levels.

The first level – individual competence

At this level, English enhances an individual's communication and information competencies.

The second level – professional integration

At this stage, English expands an individual's access to professional communities, international projects, and professional networks.

The third level – labor market mobility

A high level of language competence increases a professional's opportunities to seek employment beyond geographical and institutional boundaries, work remotely, and participate in international projects.

However, an important issue must be emphasized: the simplistic assumption that **“the higher the English proficiency, the greater the professional success”** is not scientifically sufficient.

First, the value of English depends on the occupation.

Second, the value of English emerges in combination with other competencies.

Third, language proficiency alone does not guarantee professional outcomes.

Fourth, when measuring the impact of English on earnings, factors such as education level, occupation, experience, country, social capital, and other variables must be controlled for.

Therefore, the relationship between English proficiency and professional development is better explained through a **complementarity model**.

Complementarity refers to a situation in which two or more competencies reinforce each other.

For example:

IT competence + English = broader access to the international IT labor market

Research competence + English = greater participation in international academic communication

Business competence + English = greater opportunities for international negotiations and trade

Engineering competence + English = greater participation in international technical projects

Thus, English should not be viewed as a substitute for professional expertise, but rather as a multiplier that can increase the value of professional competencies under certain conditions.

An Important Implication for Higher Education

English language education in higher education institutions should also adapt to these changes.

The traditional model:

Grammar → Vocabulary → General English → Test

may no longer be sufficient for the modern labor market.

A more effective model could be structured as:

General English → Academic English → Professional English → Workplace Communication → International Professional Practice

Under this approach, students would learn not only grammatical rules but also how to use English within their specific professional fields.

For example, an economics student should be able to read economic reports in English; an IT student should be able to analyze technical documentation; a pedagogy student should be able to read international educational research; and a journalism student should be able to analyze foreign media sources.

This approach represents a practical application of the **English for Specific Purposes (ESP)** concept.

There is also a clear need to integrate English with professional training in Uzbekistan. In 2026, issues related to improving employment opportunities for higher education graduates and aligning educational programs with labor market requirements are being discussed at the national level.

Uzbekistan's foreign language assessment system is also developing. From 2026, the expansion of a multi-level foreign language assessment system is planned, while international certificates such as IELTS, TOEFL iBT, and Cambridge qualifications are also recognized.

This process highlights the need to transform language competence from a formal certificate into genuine professional competence.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study demonstrate that English proficiency is one of the important factors in contemporary professional development. English can expand employment opportunities, facilitate access to professional information, strengthen international networking, increase access to remote and international labor markets, and enhance the practical value of other professional competencies.

However, it is not scientifically appropriate to overstate the professional value of English. Its impact is shaped by its interaction with occupation, country, labor market, level of education, professional experience, and other competencies. Therefore, English should not be interpreted as a **guarantee of success**, but rather as a **strategic competence that expands professional capital**.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Integrate English with professional subjects in higher education.

English should not be developed solely as a separate subject but also as a competence integrated with disciplinary knowledge.

2. Expand ESP programs.

Students should acquire field-specific terminology, document-reading skills, presentation skills, negotiation skills, and professional writing skills relevant to their areas of specialization.

3. Assess competence progressively based on the CEFR.

Students' language proficiency should be assessed not only through test results but also through their ability to perform real communicative tasks.

4. Strengthen professional speaking and writing skills.

Real-world situations such as job interviews, professional emails, presentations, negotiations, and project defenses should be incorporated into the learning process.

5. Bring international professional environments into the educational process.

Seminars with foreign experts, joint projects with international students, English-medium conferences, and international virtual projects should be expanded.

6. Integrate English with digital competence.

Particularly in IT, business, engineering, and academic fields, teaching English alongside the use of digital tools can increase learning effectiveness.

7. Strengthen cooperation with employers.

Universities should regularly update English language curricula based on the actual communication needs of employers.

8. Treat language certification as a means rather than an end.

IELTS, TOEFL, and other certificates may serve as important indicators; however, genuine communicative competence required for professional activity should also be assessed.

Scientific Novelty

The scientific novelty of this study lies in explaining the relationship between English proficiency and professional development not simply through the linear model of “language proficiency → employment,” but through a multidimensional conceptual model incorporating **access to information, professional communication, networking, competency complementarity, and labor mobility.**

The study demonstrates that the professional value of English depends not only on the level of English as an independent competence but also on how effectively it is integrated with other professional skills.

Practical Significance

The findings of the study can be used to improve the integration of English language education with professional subjects in higher education institutions, develop ESP programs, prepare students for the international labor market, design professional English courses, and improve graduates’ employability.

This issue is particularly relevant in the context of Uzbekistan. As efforts to strengthen higher education graduates’ integration into the labor market, develop relationships with international employers, and build modern competencies continue to accelerate, treating English as an integral component of professional competence will remain an important direction for educational policy and university practice.

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