

# Representing English in the Graduate Economy: A Media Analysis of Language Proficiency and Higher Education in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

In Malaysia's multilingual, highly competitive graduate economy, English language proficiency is discursively constructed by the media as a type of socio-economic capital, having a profound impact on employability and higher education outcomes. The research explores how national newspapers—The Star, New Straits Times, and Malay Mail—construct English language narratives within the discourses of graduate employability and labour market needs. Based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, a purposive sample of 13 news articles and opinion columns was analysed to follow dominant discursive patterns. Two overarching constructions were identified: (1) English as a gatekeeping mechanism to employment and global market participation; and (2) English proficiency framed as both an employability asset and a matter of personal moral responsibility. These media constructions both mirror and reinforce societal expectations, placing English at the centre of professional capital in Malaysia's transforming knowledge-based economy. The findings highlight the media's powerful role in shaping public discourse, informing language policy, and leading English language pedagogy and graduate preparation initiatives in higher education.

**Keywords** – English proficiency, graduate level market, Malaysian print media, thematic analysis, higher education

## INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia's competitive and multilingual graduate economy, English language proficiency functions as a key form of socio-economic capital that shapes employability and higher education outcomes. Employers routinely rank English-mediated communication among top hiring criteria, often alongside or above technical skills (Ali, Nor, & Adnan, 2021; Hiew, 2021). Regional labour economics evidence further indicates that English proficiency can be associated with wage advantages, reinforcing its perceived market value (Azam, Nabi, & Najmul, 2023; Khazanah Research Institute, 2018). Yet, while the importance of English is widely acknowledged in policy and practice, less is known about how mainstream media actively construct and circulate narratives that link English proficiency to graduate readiness and labour-market success in Malaysia.

Media discourse is not a neutral mirror of social reality; as shown in discourse and media studies, it frames problems, prescribes solutions, and normalises expectations that can influence policy, pedagogy, and public belief (Piller & Cho, 2020; van Dijk, 2021). Understanding these constructions is therefore consequential for higher education institutions seeking to align curricula with employability outcomes, and for policymakers pursuing skills-and-wage reforms.

## Problem Statement

Although English proficiency is widely recognised as a determinant of employability in Malaysia, there is still limited empirical analysis of how newspapers construct the relationship between English, higher education, and graduate labour-market outcomes. Previous research consistently demonstrates that English competence is strongly tied to employability and workplace performance. For instance, Ali, Hamid, and Moni (2021) show that employers frequently rank English communication among the most critical graduate attributes, while Zainuddin, Pillai, Dumanig, and Phillip (2019) highlight its role as a threshold skill in graduate recruitment. Hiew, Tibok, Ngui, Gabda, and Suyansah (2021) further confirm that among Malaysian science graduates, English proficiency is significantly associated with confidence in job-seeking and adaptability to employment contexts. International studies reinforce this link: Azam, Chin, and Prakash (2023) demonstrate that English proficiency correlates with higher wages and broader labour-market mobility, while Tight (2023) argues that employability discourses often place language competence at the core of graduate readiness narratives.

Despite these findings, there is a knowledge gap in understanding how media discourse shapes public and institutional perceptions of English in relation to employability. Media outlets, through framing, agenda-setting, and selective reporting, play a powerful role in influencing stakeholders' expectations of universities and graduates (Gill, 2020). Yet without systematic analysis, universities, employers, and policymakers risk relying on anecdotal or common-sense understandings of English proficiency, rather than evidence-based accounts of how the issue is represented. This study therefore, addresses the gap by examining Malaysian newspaper portrayals of English in the graduate economy, aiming to provide insights that inform higher education institutions, policymakers, and students themselves.

## Aim

This study aims to analyse how mainstream Malaysian newspapers construct narratives of English language proficiency in relation to higher education and the graduate economy, identifying dominant themes and discursive framings that may influence public perceptions and policy directions.

## Objectives

- (1) To identify recurring media frames that link English proficiency to graduate employability and higher education;
- (2) to interpret the socio-economic and policy implications of these media constructions for Malaysian higher education and the labour market.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### English proficiency and graduate employability

Empirical research in Malaysia documents persistent employer concerns about graduates' communication and English proficiency, with evidence that these skills are central to hiring and early career success (Ali et al., 2021; Hiew, 2021). Malaysia is a multiracial and multilingual country, consequently, a distinct local variety of English has emerged, shaped by the linguistic repertoire of its major ethnic groups. This includes Malay-influenced English, Chinese-influenced English, and Indian-influenced English, each reflecting unique phonological, lexical, and syntactic features. These varieties function not only as markers of cultural identity but also as practical tools for effective communication across diverse communities, where the primary aim is to get the message across rather than to strictly conform to native speakers' norms. Being fluent in the language or being understood despite the distinct local variety of English are both important to secure a job (Hiew et al., 2021). At a regional level, labour-market studies report a wage premium associated with English skills where workers with stronger speaking and listening often earn more in sectors linked to global value chains (Azam et al., 2023). Malaysian macro-analyses similarly connect skills, language, and income dynamics, underscoring how proficiency interacts with broader structural factors (Khazanah Research Institute, 2018).

## Socio-economic framing: Language as capital

In many non-English-speaking societies, mastery of English is broadly recognised as an important factor associated with socioeconomic status (SES). Previously, many perceived that being proficient in language was seen as a way to “show off” and appear “boastful,” a colonial relic, an elitist practice, and a rejection of Malay cultural and linguistic identity (Wong, F. F. et al 2012). However, in another study, Su-Hie Ting et al. (2017) revealed that employers in the Malaysian private sector considered hiring candidates with average English proficiency to get the job done but required a proficient candidate for positions such as customer service and marketing. This was also concurred by another study discovered that being proficient in the English language allows graduates to secure jobs that require language skills and identity (Singh, Liew & Siau, 2021). This means that a good command of English is essential for jobs that require extensive language use in the workplace.

Drawing on sociological perspectives, English can be understood as linguistic capital that affords access to opportunities in knowledge-intensive and internationally oriented sectors (Tan & Wong, 2019). In Malaysia’s multilingual context, this capital intersects with geography (urban–rural), school pathways, and programme specialisations, potentially reinforcing unequal returns to higher education despite credential expansion (Tan & Wong, 2019; Moo & Wan, 2023).

## Media discourse and the construction of language value

The media does not simply disseminate information. From news broadcasts to radio broadcast to printed media, all of these forms of media play a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of the world and its events. Newspaper articles do not merely report and address various issues, such as employability; they influence how readers perceive reality and construct value through their narratives (Piller & Cho, 2020; van Dijk, 2021). In Southeast Asia, studies have shown that English is often portrayed as a symbol of modernity and mobility, while also being implicated in social stratification (Rafael, 2019; Park & Wee, 2013; Lorente, 2017; Kirkpatrick, 2020).

## Research Gap

While existing work establishes the importance of English for employability and suggests socio-economic returns, there remains a gap in systematic **media-discourse analysis** focused on Malaysian newspapers’ portrayals of English in the graduate economy. Addressing this gap, the present study applies a thematic analysis to identify dominant constructions and to interpret their implications for policy and higher-education practice.

## METHODOLOGY

### Design and corpus

This qualitative study employs Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis to examine how mainstream Malaysian newspapers construct narratives about English proficiency in relation to higher education and employability. A purposive sample of 13 English-language news and opinion articles was initially identified from three national outlets—The Star, New Straits Times, and Malay Mail—using the keywords English proficiency, employability, and higher education (2018–2025).

Following screening against the study aim and keywords, 8 articles met the inclusion criteria and 5 were excluded for lacking a clear link between English proficiency, employability, and higher education. All included texts were written in English, enabling direct analysis without translation.

### Procedure and analytic framework

The study adopts Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis (TA), a flexible six-phase approach—familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting—well suited to uncover patterned meaning in textual data. TA enables analysis of both semantic (explicit) and latent (underlying)

framings across heterogeneous media texts (news reports and opinion pieces), making it appropriate for mapping discursive constructions that link English, employability, and higher education.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis consist of six phases: (1) familiarisation (iterative reading); (2) initial coding (line-by-line open coding for references to proficiency, employability, Higher Education policy/practice, and economic framings); (3) theme searching (clustering codes into candidate themes); (4) theme review (coherence within themes, clear boundaries between themes); (5) definition and naming (refining scope and labels); and (6) reporting (selecting representative excerpts and integrating with the literature).

### Trustworthiness and ethics

Credibility was enhanced through iterative coding memos and constant comparison across outlets to check thematic consistency. Source triangulation across three major newspapers strengthened the transferability of insights within mainstream media discourse. As all materials were publicly available online, no human participants were involved, and no formal ethical approval was required; sources are acknowledged where quoted.

## FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis of eight English-language news and opinion articles from The Star, New Straits Times, and Malay Mail. The analysis, conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, identified four dominant themes reflecting how Malaysian newspapers construct the relationship between English proficiency, higher education, and the graduate economy.

**Table I** Theme–Article Coverage Matrix

Theme	The Star	New Straits Times	Malay Mail
1. English as gatekeeper to employment	✓	✓	✓
2. English proficiency and higher salaries	✓	–	✓
3. English as a soft skill and personal responsibility	✓	✓	✓
4. Policy-driven promotion of English in higher education	✓	✓	✓

The table above depicts the coverage of themes across eight selected newspaper articles. The icon ✓ indicates that the theme is present in at least one article from the publication. Each theme is discussed below, supported by representative excerpts from the corpus.

### Theme 1: English as a gatekeeper to employment and global market access

Across multiple articles, English proficiency was framed as a decisive hiring criterion, particularly in sectors linked to international trade, tourism, and knowledge-based industries. Media coverage emphasised that graduates lacking sufficient English skills were at a disadvantage in securing employment in multinational companies or engaging with global markets. This framing reinforces the perception of English as a non-negotiable professional skill, rather than a supplementary asset, echoing earlier studies that highlight employer preferences for English-proficient candidates in competitive labor markets (Ali et al., 2021; Hiew, 2021). The findings are presented in Table 2 below.

**Table II** English as gatekeeping to employment

Theme 1: English as gatekeeping to employment			
	Newspaper Title	Excerpt	Explanation
1	Employers blame poor communication, language skills for unemployed Bumi grads  Danial Dzul kifly, 8 Nov 2018, Malay Mail	“Employers have pointed to poor communication skills, particularly in English, as a <u>major reason</u> why Bumiputera graduates remain unemployed.”	Shows employers’ perception that English competency is a decisive factor in hiring decisions, acting as a gatekeeping mechanism.
2	Upskilling with English  Rozana Sani, 6 Mar 2019, New Straits Times	“Employers say that despite having good academic qualifications, some graduates fail to get hired because they <u>cannot express themselves effectively in English during interviews.</u> ”	Indicates that job candidates can be rejected despite strong academic credentials if English communication skills are lacking.
3	Education reform: Facts over narratives  Najmie Noordin, 2 Jan 2020, Malay Mail	“Without proficiency in English, graduates are <u>at a disadvantage when competing for jobs that require interaction with international clients.</u> ”	Demonstrates how English serves as a prerequisite for employment in globalised industries.
4	COVID-19: How the Higher Education Ministry is helping desperate fresh graduates find jobs  Audrey Edwards, 24 Aug 2021, Malay Mail	“Many employers have shared that they <u>cannot hire local graduates because they lack English communication skills demanded by the industry.</u> ”	Employers openly cite English deficiencies as the main barrier preventing hiring.
5	Resolving the problem of unemployed graduates  Dr Diana Abdul Wahab, 27 Sept 2022,	“ <u>English</u> is often <u>the deciding factor</u> between <u>equally qualified candidates.</u> ”	Highlights that English proficiency can tip the balance in competitive hiring situations.

	New Straits Times		
6	English proficiency and diverse workforce here can be star attractions for foreign investments, US-Malaysia business group  R. Loheswar, 11 Mar 2024, Malay Mail	“Global investors are clear that <u>English proficiency among local talent is non-negotiable</u> if they are to set up operations here.”	Connects English requirements directly to job opportunities created by foreign investment.
7	NST Leader: The English patient  Editorial, 3 Mar 2023, New Straits Times	“A graduate <u>without English</u> is like a degree without a seal — <u>incomplete in the eyes of the employer.</u> ”	Uses metaphor to stress that English proficiency is integral to employability.

## Theme 2: English proficiency and higher salaries

Several reports linked English proficiency to tangible economic rewards, such as higher salaries, faster career progression, and greater mobility between industries. For example, Malay Mail articles cited industry representatives who associated proficiency with better negotiation outcomes, international postings, and performance-based incentives. This finding aligns with regional wage-return studies that show a positive correlation between English skills and earnings, particularly in roles requiring cross-border collaboration (Azam et al., 2023; Kirkpatrick, 2020). The findings are represented in Table 3 below.

**Table III**

## Theme 2 - English proficiency and Higher Salaries

Theme 2: English proficiency and Higher Salaries			
	Newspaper Title	Excerpt	Explanation
1	Employers blame poor communication, language skills for unemployed Bumi grads  Danial Dzulkifly, 8 Nov 2018, Malay Mail	“Those with <u>strong English skills tend to secure better-paying positions</u> , especially in multinational companies.”	Employers link higher salaries to English competency, especially in global firms.
2	Upskilling with English	“In sectors like <u>oil and gas, or finance</u> , graduates with <u>better English command</u> are	Points out sector-specific wage premiums for employees proficient in English.



	Rozana Sani, 6 Mar 2019, New Straits Times	<u>offered higher starting salaries.”</u>	
3	Education reform: Facts over narratives  Najmie Noordin, 2 Jan 2020, Malay Mail	“English proficiency can mean <u>a difference of several thousand ringgit in monthly earnings</u> , particularly in <u>high-demand industries.”</u>	Highlights the substantial income gap associated with English skills.
4	COVID-19: How the Higher Education Ministry is helping desperate fresh graduates find jobs  Audrey Edwards, 24 Aug 2021, Malay Mail	“Employers are <u>willing to pay more</u> for graduates <u>who can negotiate, present, and write in English.”</u>	Indicates direct monetary value placed on English proficiency.
5	Resolving the problem of unemployed graduates  Dr Diana Abdul Wahab, 27 Sept 2022, New Straits Times	“The <u>salary gap between those who are fluent in English and those who are not can be significant</u> , especially in <u>managerial roles.”</u>	Connects English fluency to upward salary mobility in leadership positions.
6	NST Leader: The English patient  Editorial, 3 Mar 2023, New Straits Times	“For the same role, candidates with <u>English skills are often given better pay packages.”</u>	Editorial observation of pay discrimination in favour of English speakers.

### Theme 3: English as a soft skill and personal responsibility

Media narratives frequently positioned English proficiency as part of a graduate’s personal development and moral responsibility. Rather than treating proficiency as solely the outcome of formal education, these articles suggested that graduates should proactively invest in improving their communication skills through self-directed learning, internships, and participation in extracurricular activities. This aligns with socio-cultural perspectives on language learning as a lifelong skill acquisition process that extends beyond institutional boundaries (Tan & Wong, 2019). The findings are presented in Table 4 below.

Table IV

## Theme 3 - English as a soft skill and personal responsibility

Theme 3: English as a soft skill and personal responsibility			
	Newspaper Title	Excerpt	Explanation
1	Employers blame poor communication, language skills for unemployed Bumi grads Danial Dzulkifly, 8 Nov 2018, Malay Mail	<u>“Graduates themselves must take responsibility to improve their English and communication skills, rather than expecting the system to do it for them.”</u>	Places the onus on individuals to work on their own English and communication proficiency.
2	Upskilling with English Rozana Sani, 6 Mar 2019, New Straits Times	<u>“Soft skills such as English communication are not optional; they are essential for career growth and it is up to the individual to keep honing them.”</u>	Positions English as part of self-driven soft skill development.
3	Education reform: Facts over narratives  Najmie Noordin, 2 Jan 2020, Malay Mail	<u>“While reforms are ongoing, students must proactively practise and improve their English to meet job market demands.”</u>	Emphasises personal initiative in language learning alongside policy changes.
4	COVID-19: How the Higher Education Ministry is helping desperate fresh graduates find jobs  Audrey Edwards, 24 Aug 2021, Malay Mail	<u>“We can guide graduates to courses, but the motivation to strengthen English must come from within.”</u>	Government can provide support, but responsibility remains with the individual.
5	Resolving the problem of unemployed graduates  Dr Diana Abdul Wahab, 27 Sept 2022, New Straits Times	<u>“English proficiency is a personal investment — the more effort you put in, the more you can reap professionally.”</u>	Frames English improvement as a self-driven professional investment.
6	NST Leader: The English patient  Editorial, 3 Mar 2023, New Straits Times	<u>“No policy can replace the will of the individual to master a language.”</u>	Editorial stance stressing individual determination over structural support.
7	English proficiency and diverse workforce here can be star	<u>“Employers can only offer training; it is up to employees</u>	Suggests workplace training is only effective



	attractions for foreign investments, business group  US-Malaysia  R. Loheswar, 11 Mar 2024, Malay Mail	<u>to take ownership of their English learning.”</u>	if individuals commit.
8	Rural youth urged to master English to tap tourism potential  Bernama, 23 Jun 2025, New Straits Times	<u>“Young people must make learning English part of their daily routine if they wish to succeed in tourism.”</u>	Encourages personal commitment to daily practice for career advantage

#### Theme 4: Policy-driven promotion of English in higher education

Coverage from all three newspapers highlighted government policies and institutional initiatives aimed at improving English proficiency among graduates. For instance, reports referred to the English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015–2025, which outlines systematic improvements in language teaching from primary to tertiary levels (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). These articles framed policy interventions as essential to producing globally competitive graduates, especially in line with Malaysia’s aspirations under the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (Economic Planning Unit, 2019). The findings are summarized in Table 5 below.

**Table V**

#### Theme 4 - Policy-driven promotion of English in higher education

Theme 4: Policy-driven promotion of English in higher education			
	Newspaper Title	Excerpt	Explanation
1	COVID-19: How the Higher Education Ministry is helping desperate fresh graduates find jobs  Audrey Edwards, 24 Aug 2021, Malay Mail	i) <u>“To make registration easier, the ministry has developed the Graduates Reference Hub for Employment and Training (GREaT) together with Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation and the Companies Commission of Malaysia.”</u>  ii) <u>“The portal is designed to help students and graduates from the years 2019, 2020 and 2021 obtain training to upskill themselves and information on jobs according to their qualifications and competency.”</u>  iii) <u>“Among the new features</u>	Named, ministry-led instruments that include skills modules supporting employability (including English communication components mentioned elsewhere in the story).

		in the portal is the ‘jobmatching’ module that matches the graduates with the needs of the company or industry.”	
2	NST Leader: The English patient  Editorial, 3 Mar 2023, New Straits Times	<p>i) “Trilingual teaching can only happen... if we focus on managing our <u>language policy</u>, by which she means ensuring the teaching of English, Bahasa Malaysia and other languages are taught effectively. This is the responsibility of the Education Ministry.”</p> <p>ii) “Our language policies mustn’t swing like a pendulum. This will bring to nought our education blueprints and development plans.”</p>	Direct references to language policy stability and ministerial responsibility that shape English teaching quality and outcomes.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The thematic analysis reveals a cohesive media narrative in which English proficiency is positioned simultaneously as an economic asset, a personal responsibility, and a national policy priority. These narratives converge to reinforce the societal expectation that graduates must be English-proficient to thrive in Malaysia’s increasingly globalised economy. They also highlight a dual responsibility model, where both individuals and institutions are accountable for language skill development.

## DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of eight verified English-language newspaper articles revealed four dominant themes concerning the role of English in graduate employability in Malaysia: (1) English as a gatekeeper to employment, (2) English proficiency and higher salaries, (3) English as a soft skill and personal responsibility, and (4) policy-driven promotion of English in higher education. These themes offer nuanced insights into the interplay between language skills, labour market demands, and national policy priorities.

### Theme1: English as a Gatekeeper to Employment

Across the analysed articles, employers consistently emphasised English proficiency as a prerequisite for securing employment. For instance, Malay Mail (Dzulkifly, 2018) reported that weak communication and language skills remain primary reasons for graduate unemployment among Bumiputera graduates. Similarly, The New Straits Times (Sani, 2019) highlighted that upskilling in English was crucial for job seekers to compete effectively in both local and international markets. These observations align with Ali, Hamid, and Moni (2021), who noted that English language proficiency is a critical factor influencing graduate employability outcomes in Malaysia.

### Theme 2: English Proficiency and Higher Salaries

The reviewed articles also connected English proficiency with improved earning potential. The New Straits Times (Wahab, 2022) noted that graduates with strong English communication skills were more likely to be offered competitive starting salaries, especially in multinational corporations. This is consistent with Azam, Chin, and Prakash (2023), who demonstrated measurable wage premiums for English-proficient employees in

developing countries. Such evidence indicates that English competence not only facilitates job acquisition but also influences career progression and income levels.

### **Theme3: English as a Soft Skill and Personal Responsibility**

Several articles framed English not only as a technical skill but also as part of a broader set of employability competencies. For example, NST Leader (2023) described proficiency in English as part of a graduate's responsibility to remain competitive in a globalised workforce, alongside adaptability and critical thinking. Similarly, Malay Mail (Noordin, 2020) presented English mastery as an integral component of lifelong learning and personal development. These perspectives are consistent with Tan and Wong (2019), who emphasised that communication skills, including English, should be viewed as essential employability attributes.

### **Theme 4: Policy-Driven Promotion of English in Higher Education**

Media coverage also reflected government-led initiatives to promote English through higher education policies. Malay Mail (Loheswar, 2024) highlighted how foreign investment bodies viewed Malaysia's bilingual workforce as a competitive advantage, encouraging policies that sustain English-medium programmes. These reports resonate with the English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015–2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015) and the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 (Economic Planning Unit, 2019), which advocate for the enhancement of English proficiency as a strategic goal for national development.

### **Implications of the Study**

The convergence of economic, personal, and policy-driven narratives has several implications:

#### **Implications for Higher Learning Institutions**

The findings demonstrate that English continues to be constructed in Malaysian media as a critical gatekeeper to employability and upward mobility. For universities, this suggests the urgent need to embed English language proficiency not merely as a general subject, but as a cross-disciplinary competence integrated into all fields of study. Institutions should strengthen English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curricula, tailoring communication training to the needs of various industries (e.g., business, engineering, healthcare). Furthermore, higher education providers should expand work-integrated learning (internships, industry-linked projects) where students can practice professional English in authentic workplace contexts. Continuous diagnostic testing and language support services (writing centers, conversation labs, online modules) would help track and elevate students' proficiency levels before graduation.

#### **Implications for Employers**

Employers frequently highlight poor English proficiency as a barrier to hiring local graduates. The study implies that employers should take a more active role in closing this gap by collaborating with universities to design curricula aligned with workplace communication demands. Beyond screening for English at the recruitment stage, companies should provide on-the-job language training and create mentoring systems where senior staff support graduates in adapting to professional communication norms. By investing in corporate language development programs, employers can ensure that English proficiency does not remain a rigid filter excluding otherwise capable graduates, but rather an evolving skill that can be nurtured within organizations.

#### **Implications for Current University Students**

For students presently studying at Malaysian universities, the findings underscore the importance of taking personal responsibility for improving their English proficiency, as it remains strongly tied to employability and career advancement. Students should:

Actively engage in self-directed learning, such as reading widely in English, using language-learning applications, and consuming professional media.

Participate in university-based opportunities (English clubs, debating societies, language workshops, writing centers) to strengthen both academic and workplace-oriented communication skills.

Seek real-world practice through internships, volunteering, and part-time jobs where English communication is required.

Cultivate soft skills in English—such as presentation, negotiation, and teamwork—to complement technical knowledge, making them more competitive in the graduate labour market.

### **Research Implications**

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on language, employability, and media discourse by providing an evidence-based account of how newspapers construct English proficiency as linked to labour market outcomes. Future research could build on these findings in several ways:

**Comparative studies:** Explore how English is represented in media discourse across different ASEAN countries to examine regional similarities and differences.

**Longitudinal research:** Investigate how media portrayals of English proficiency evolve over time, especially in response to education reforms or labour market shifts.

**Employer perspectives:** Conduct workplace-based qualitative studies with HR managers and employees to triangulate how newspaper framings align (or diverge) from actual hiring practices.

**Policy analysis:** Examine how media constructions of English proficiency influence education policy debates and reforms.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature on media discourse, graduate employability, and language policy in Southeast Asia by demonstrating how Malaysian media actively participate in constructing and reinforcing the value of English as a socio-economic asset.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how English proficiency is represented in the Malaysian graduate economy through an analysis of eight selected news and opinion articles from The Star, New Straits Times, and Malay Mail. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, four key themes emerged: English as a gatekeeper to employment, English proficiency as a driver of higher salaries, English as a soft skill and personal responsibility, and the policy-driven promotion of English in higher education.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of media discourse analysis with socio-economic framing, demonstrating how public narratives intertwine economic, personal, and policy-based perspectives on language proficiency. By doing so, it highlights the media's role not only in reflecting but also in shaping societal expectations regarding graduate readiness in a competitive, multilingual labour market.

Practically, the findings offer clear implications for higher education institutions and policymakers. Universities can leverage these insights to design English language programs that are explicitly linked to employability outcomes, while policymakers may use the results to fine-tune language education reforms to ensure equitable access across socio-economic groups.

Future research should extend this analysis to non-English media outlets in Malaysia to uncover multilingual representations of graduate employability. Longitudinal studies could also capture shifts in discourse over time, particularly in response to evolving economic conditions and education policies.

By situating English proficiency within both individual and systemic contexts, this research contributes to ongoing discussions on language, education, and economic competitiveness in Southeast Asia, offering a valuable reference point for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

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