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Students' Experiences in Developing English Skills for Post-Study Career Readiness: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

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A B S T R A C T

English proficiency is increasingly important for graduate employability, yet formal university learning does not always prepare students for spontaneous professional communication. This study explored how master's students in English Education experience the development of English skills for Post-Study Career Readiness. A qualitative design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed. Three participants were selected purposively from an English Education master's program at Universitas Jambi, and data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The analysis identified four interconnected challenges: persistent language anxiety in high-stakes situations, a gap between academic English and professional communication demands, limited access to authentic English practice, and declining motivation caused by perceived unpreparedness. These experiences show that career-related English development is shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by professional identity, opportunities for authentic interaction, and students' confidence in approaching future work roles. The study concludes that English Education programs should provide more professionally contextualized communication practice, authentic workplace exposure, and affective support so that students can connect academic learning with realistic career demands.

1. Introduction

English proficiency has become an important component of graduate employability because many occupations require employees to communicate across linguistic and national boundaries. In Indonesia, English is increasingly used in education, international business, digital work, professional training, and communication with global partners. Employers therefore expect graduates not only to understand English but also to use it effectively in meetings, presentations, interviews, written

correspondence, and collaborative tasks (Deepa et al., 2023; Suarta et al., 2017). In the Indonesian higher education context, English proficiency and broader twenty-first-century skills are also considered essential for students' readiness and competitiveness in the global workplace (Hadiyanto et al., 2022). From an employability perspective, career readiness involves the ability to mobilize knowledge, communication skills, personal attributes, and adaptive capacities in real work contexts rather than merely possessing academic credentials (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Yorke, 2006).

Despite this demand, university learning does not always correspond directly to professional communication. Students may become familiar with grammar, academic reading, essay writing, and examination tasks while receiving limited preparation for spontaneous interaction, negotiation, feedback, or workplace problem solving. Brown and Lee (2025) emphasize that language competence develops through meaningful communication, while Oxford (2018) notes that learners need strategies that help them transfer classroom knowledge to authentic language use. When academic performance becomes the main indicator of proficiency, students may obtain satisfactory grades yet remain uncertain about their ability to communicate naturally in professional environments. Recent studies also show that English learning challenges are closely related to speaking confidence, classroom interaction, authentic communication, and the need for more contextual learning strategies. Students' difficulties in English learning have been associated with limited confidence, vocabulary, and speaking practice, while interactive speaking activities and debate-based learning have been shown to support engagement, fluency, confidence, collaboration, and critical thinking (Buhaeri et al., 2026; Ocktavia et al., 2025; Yumna et al., 2026). These findings suggest that English proficiency should not be understood only as mastery of grammar or academic tasks, but also as the ability to use English meaningfully in social, academic, and future professional situations.

The development of career-relevant English is also shaped by affective experience. Language anxiety can create communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and avoidance of situations in which competence is publicly judged (Horwitz et al., 1986). For English Education students, this pressure may be intensified because other people often assume that they should already speak English accurately and confidently. Arnold (1999, 2020) argues that anxiety, motivation, self-esteem, and attitudes are integral to language learning rather than peripheral influences. Similarly, self-efficacy affects whether learners approach difficult tasks, persist after mistakes, and interpret setbacks as temporary or as evidence of inability (Amatullah, 2021; Bandura, 1997). Low confidence may consequently reduce participation even when students possess sufficient linguistic knowledge. Identity and motivation further complicate the transition from university study to employment. Learners invest in English partly because it represents access to imagined professional identities and future communities (Norton, 2000). Career-oriented motivation can encourage sustained effort, but it may also weaken when the distance between a learner's current ability and desired professional self appears too large. Dörnyei (1998) explains that motivation is dynamic and influenced by expectations of success, while Baker (1992) and

Rosenberg (1965) show how attitudes and self-evaluation shape engagement. In this context, students' experiences of English development involve not only what they can do linguistically, but also what using English means for their sense of competence and professional legitimacy.

Authentic practice opportunities are therefore essential. Self-regulated learners can set goals, monitor progress, seek feedback, and select strategies beyond formal classroom requirements (Astuti & Rozikin, 2024; Lu et al., 2017). However, individual regulation is constrained when students have little access to English-speaking communities, internships, professional networks, or other environments requiring unscripted communication. Masaki (2023) highlights the social and contextual dimensions of self-regulation, and Movafagh Ardestani et al. (2025) demonstrate that anxiety can remain closely connected to learners' perceptions of their competence. Thus, limited exposure may maintain a cycle in which anxiety restricts participation, restricted participation prevents fluency development, and slow progress further reduces confidence.

Career Adaptability Theory provides an additional lens for understanding this transition. Savickas (1997) defines career adaptability as readiness to manage expected vocational tasks and unexpected changes in working life. Its four dimensions, namely concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, describe how individuals think about their future, take responsibility for development, explore possible roles, and believe they can perform necessary actions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). For English Education students, these dimensions can be observed in their awareness of professional language demands, independent efforts to improve, exploration of authentic practice, and confidence in carrying out English-mediated work tasks.

Previous studies have commonly examined employability or English competence through surveys, test results, and generalized perceptions (Mufarrihati et al., 2025). Such approaches are valuable for identifying broad patterns but provide less detail about how students interpret pressure, uncertainty, and professional expectations in everyday life. Phenomenological inquiry is appropriate when the aim is to understand the meaning individuals assign to significant experience (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Husserl, 1970). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the lived experiences of master's students in English Education as they developed English skills for Post-Study Career Readiness, with particular attention to the challenges that shaped their confidence, motivation, and perceived preparedness for professional communication.

2. Methodology

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA was selected because it focuses on how individuals make sense of personally significant experiences and supports detailed, idiographic analysis

before patterns are examined across cases (Smith et al., 2021). The approach was appropriate for investigating how students interpreted their English development, professional expectations, and perceived readiness for work. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The sample consisted of three master's students enrolled in the English Education program at Universitas Jambi. A small and relatively homogeneous sample was retained to support the depth of analysis expected in IPA. The inclusion criteria were: (1) current enrollment in the master's English Education program; (2) active engagement with career preparation, such as job searching, internships, professional training, or work requiring English; (3) willingness to reflect openly on English learning experiences; and (4) comfort participating in English, Indonesian, or a combination of both languages. Participants were identified as P1, P2, and P3 to maintain anonymity.

Instrument

The primary research instrument was an in-depth semi-structured interview guide. Open-ended questions invited participants to describe situations in which they felt prepared or unprepared to use English, sources of anxiety and confidence, differences between academic and professional communication, access to authentic practice, motivational changes, and expectations for their future careers (Abrar, 2024). Follow-up prompts were used to obtain concrete examples and clarify the personal meaning of each experience. The flexible format allowed each participant to emphasize events that were most significant to them while ensuring that comparable areas were discussed across interviews.

Data Collection

Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews. Participants were allowed to use English, Indonesian, or both so that language choice would not limit the depth of reflection. The interviews focused on lived experiences rather than short factual responses, and participants were encouraged to describe specific academic, social, and professional situations. The interview material was prepared as textual data for analysis, with identifying information removed and participant labels used in all reporting.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through the six-stage IPA process described by Smith et al. (2021): reading and re-reading each account, making exploratory notes, developing experiential statements, identifying connections among statements within a case, repeating the process for the next case, and developing patterns across cases. Analysis began idiographically so that each participant's account was considered on its own terms before cross-case similarities and differences were examined. The final patterns were organized as Group Experiential Themes supported by verbatim excerpts.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was addressed by maintaining a clear connection between interpretations and participants' quotations, preserving contextual detail, and applying the same analytical sequence to each case. These practices support credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability in qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participation was voluntary, the purpose of the study was explained before data collection, and identities were protected through participant codes. Quotations were presented only when they directly supported the interpretation of a theme.

3. Results and Discussion

Before presenting the thematic findings, this section briefly describes the interview data collection process to clarify the context in which the findings emerged. The study involved three master's students in the English Education program who were selected purposively because they had experiences and concerns related to English skill development for post-study career readiness. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and allowed participants to use English, Indonesian, or a combination of both languages so that they could express their experiences comfortably.

The interview questions focused on participants' experiences in developing English skills, situations in which they felt confident or anxious, differences between academic English and professional communication, access to authentic English practice, and expectations for future careers. Follow-up questions were used to explore concrete experiences, such as speaking in class, preparing for job interviews, giving presentations, communicating in professional contexts, and using digital resources for independent learning. The interview data were then analyzed through the stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, including repeated reading, exploratory noting, development of experiential statements, identification of connections within each case, and development of patterns across cases. This process resulted in four Group Experiential Themes that represent the participants' shared and distinctive experiences. The analysis produced four Group Experiential Themes that represented the central challenges experienced by the participants. Before the thematic findings are discussed, Table 1 summarizes the participants' academic positions and intended career directions.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Participant	Study Focus	Semester	Career Target
P1	English Education	3	English teacher or lecturer
P2	English Education	3	Educational trainer or content creator
P3	English Education	2	Professional English trainer or international sector

As shown in Table 2, three themes were shared by all participants, whereas motivational erosion was strongly expressed by P2 and P3. The themes were interconnected rather than isolated because anxiety, limited practice, perceived skill gaps, and motivation influenced one another.

Table 2. Group Experiential Themes

Group Experiential Theme	Sub-theme	Participants
Persistent language anxiety in high-stakes situations	Fear of public speaking and professional performance evaluation	P1, P2, P3
Gap between academic English and professional communication demands	Exam-oriented learning compared with real workplace communication	P1, P2, P3
Limited access to authentic English practice opportunities	Scarce exposure to spontaneous and career-relevant interaction	P1, P2, P3
Motivational erosion due to perceived unpreparedness	Declining effort and widening distance between actual and desired competence	P2, P3

Persistent Language Anxiety in High-Stakes Situations

All participants described anxiety when English use carried visible academic or professional consequences. The anxiety was strongest when participants expected evaluation by classmates, lecturers, recruiters, or future colleagues, and it often disrupted their ability to speak spontaneously. P1 explained that knowing an answer did not guarantee participation because grammatical concern interrupted speech: "Sometimes I already know the answer, but I am too scared to say it out loud. I keep thinking, what if my grammar is wrong? What if people think I am not good enough? It becomes very difficult to just speak naturally." P2 described a similar reaction when imagining job interviews in English, noting that the presence of a real interviewer made rehearsed language difficult to access: "When I think about job interviews in English, I feel my heart beating faster. I practice at home, but the moment I imagine a real interviewer in front of me, everything I practiced seems to disappear. I feel like my English is suddenly not enough." P3 connected this anxiety to the professional identity attached to studying English, because mistakes seemed to contradict expectations of expertise: "People expect a lot from us because we study English. So, when I make a mistake, it feels worse than if someone from another major makes the same mistake. That pressure never really goes away."

These accounts correspond with the components of foreign language anxiety described by Horwitz et al. (1986), particularly communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. The findings also show that anxiety was intensified by identity expectations: participants were not only concerned about making linguistic errors but also about being seen as professionally illegitimate. Arnold (1999, 2020) argues that affective barriers can restrict risk-taking even when learners possess relevant knowledge. This interpretation is reinforced by Movafagh Ardestani et al. (2025), who connect language anxiety with learners' self-regulatory and evaluative processes. The participants' experiences therefore suggest that additional grammar instruction alone would not resolve the problem; they need repeated low-risk

opportunities to perform professional communication and reinterpret mistakes as part of development.

Gap Between Academic English and Professional Communication Demands

A second challenge concerned the discontinuity between tasks completed in the master's program and the communication expected in workplaces. Participants valued their academic knowledge, but they felt that reading theory and writing papers did not automatically prepare them to respond naturally in unscripted professional encounters. P1 recognized this difference during an interaction with a recruiter at a job fair: "In class, I can write a good essay. I can analyze a text. But at the job fair, the recruiter just started talking to me casually in English, and I froze. I did not know how to respond naturally. I realized that what I practice in class is very different from what real life needs." P2 viewed the strong emphasis on assignments and tests as insufficient for tasks such as explaining ideas, negotiating, and giving feedback: "Most of our assignments are about writing academic papers or passing tests. But in a real job, nobody asks you to write a literature review. They want you to explain your ideas clearly, negotiate, and give feedback, which are things we never really practice in class." P3 similarly distinguished theoretical preparation from communicative readiness: "I have learned a lot of theory about language acquisition and pedagogy. But theory does not make me more confident in using English at work. I still feel like there is a big gap between what I have studied and what I actually need to do."

The findings support the distinction between academic achievement and employability competence. Deepa et al. (2023) and Suarta et al. (2017) emphasize that employers value functional communication, adaptability, and interaction across professional contexts. Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007) likewise describe employability as an integration of knowledge, skills, experience, self-efficacy, and reflection. The participants did not reject academic learning; rather, they experienced difficulty transferring it into real-time performance. Brown and Lee (2025) and Oxford (2018) suggest that meaningful use and strategic transfer are necessary for communicative development. The gap also affected identity because students who had successfully constructed themselves as academic English users did not yet feel recognized by themselves as professional English users, a tension consistent with Norton's (2000) account of language learning and imagined identities. Consequently, the academic-professional gap should be addressed through tasks that require students to move from controlled language performance to purposeful workplace communication.

Limited Access to Authentic English Practice Opportunities

All participants identified the scarcity of authentic, career-relevant practice as a structural limitation. Formal classes provided exposure to English, but interaction was commonly prepared, monitored, and connected to assignments rather than to workplace demands. P1 explained that English was rarely necessary in everyday communication outside class: "Outside of class, I almost never need to use English in real conversation. Everyone around me speaks Indonesian. So, my English only

gets practiced when I have an assignment. That is not enough to become really fluent." P2 attempted to compensate through social media and online videos but considered these activities less valuable than sustained workplace interaction: "I know that internships would help a lot. But finding one where you actually use English every day is not easy here. Most opportunities are not connected to international environments. So, I just try to use social media and YouTube, but it is not the same as real practice." P3 distinguished formal seminar performance from spontaneous conversation that requires rapid interpretation and response: "In seminars, we speak English, but it is always formal and prepared. Nobody has a real free conversation in English. There are no situations where I have to think quickly and respond naturally. That kind of practice simply does not exist in my environment."

This theme indicates that motivation and self-regulation operate within environmental limits. Learners may independently seek strategies, monitor progress, and use digital resources, as described by Astuti and Rozikin (2024) and Lu et al. (2017), but those efforts cannot fully reproduce the interactional demands of an authentic professional community. Masaki (2023) emphasizes that self-regulation is socially situated, while Arnold (2020) argues that meaningful out-of-class experience can strengthen both competence and emotional engagement. The participants' difficulty accessing internships or English-using networks therefore represents more than an individual lack of initiative. It is a contextual constraint that reduces the frequency of spontaneous practice and allows anxiety to remain untested. Programs could address this limitation through simulations, employer-linked projects, mentoring, virtual exchange, and internships in which English is required for purposeful communication. Such opportunities would help students connect independent learning with social interaction and professional feedback.

Motivational Erosion Due to Perceived Unpreparedness

P2 and P3 described motivation as gradually weakening when they compared their current ability with more fluent peers or with professionals in their target careers. For P2, comparison changed the meaning of effort because practice no longer represented progress but became evidence that the desired level remained distant: "There was a time when I started to feel like no matter how hard I tried, my English was still not at the level I needed. I watched classmates who seemed so confident and fluent, and I thought maybe this is just not something I will ever be able to do well. That feeling made me want to try less." P3 experienced a similar conflict between an ambitious professional goal and uncertainty about whether that identity was attainable: "I want to be an English trainer in an international company, but sometimes I listen to how people in that field speak so naturally and confidently, and I wonder if I will ever reach that level. It makes me feel like my efforts here are not enough, and honestly it is hard to keep pushing yourself when you feel that way."

These narratives demonstrate that career-oriented motivation is not automatically stable. Dörnyei (1998) explains that motivation is affected by perceived competence, expectations of success, and the value attached to a goal. Positive

attitudes toward English may initiate effort (Baker, 1992), but repeated negative self-comparison can damage self-esteem and willingness to participate (Rosenberg, 1965). From a career adaptability perspective, the participants showed strong concern about the future and curiosity about professional roles, yet confidence was weakened when the route toward those roles seemed unclear (Savickas, 1997; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The result is a paradox: high professional aspirations motivate students initially but can later discourage them when no visible sequence of achievable progress connects present competence with the desired career. This finding indicates the importance of staged goals and visible progress markers in career-oriented English development.

Integrated Interpretation and Educational Implications

Across the four themes, the participants' difficulties formed a mutually reinforcing pattern. Anxiety reduced spontaneous participation; limited participation restricted authentic practice; restricted practice maintained the perceived academic-professional gap; and the continuing gap weakened confidence and motivation. This pattern explains why students could possess substantial academic knowledge while still feeling unprepared. It also shows that career readiness cannot be developed through isolated language exercises because it involves interaction among competence, identity, opportunity, and adaptability.

Viewed from the perspective of career readiness, the participants' experiences indicate that English skills function as more than academic achievement. Their narratives show that career readiness requires the ability to transfer linguistic knowledge into professional action, such as speaking in interviews, explaining ideas, negotiating meaning, responding spontaneously, and participating in workplace communication. This interpretation is consistent with employability perspectives that emphasize the integration of knowledge, skills, self-efficacy, experience, and reflection. In relation to Career Adaptability Theory, the participants demonstrated concern about their future careers and curiosity about professional English use, but their control and confidence were weakened by anxiety, limited exposure, and unclear developmental pathways. Therefore, the main issue was not simply whether students had learned English, but whether they had sufficient opportunities to transform English knowledge into adaptable professional competence.

More specifically, the findings indicate that different English skills contribute to career readiness in different but interconnected ways. Speaking skills support students' ability to express ideas, answer questions, participate in discussions, and respond spontaneously in professional situations. Presentation skills are important because graduates may need to explain concepts, deliver information clearly, and communicate arguments in front of students, colleagues, employers, or professional audiences. Professional communication skills, including the ability to use appropriate language in meetings, feedback sessions, email correspondence, and workplace problem-solving, help students move beyond academic English toward communication practices required in employment contexts. Interview skills are also central to career readiness because job interviews often become the first formal

opportunity for graduates to demonstrate not only their qualifications but also their confidence, clarity, and professional identity in English. Therefore, English proficiency contributes to career readiness when students are able to transform linguistic knowledge into communicative performance that is relevant to workplace demands.

The findings also relate closely to twenty-first-century competencies. English development in this study was connected to communication, collaboration, adaptability, self-direction, digital learning, and problem-solving in authentic contexts. Participants who relied on social media, online videos, seminars, and independent practice showed attempts to regulate their own learning, but these efforts remained insufficient without structured opportunities for interaction. This suggests that English Education programs should not treat English proficiency as a separate language subject only. Instead, English should be positioned as a practical competence that supports graduates' ability to collaborate, present ideas, respond to uncertainty, and participate in global or professional communities after graduation.

This interpretation is consistent with recent research emphasizing that English learning should be connected with authentic communication, project-based tasks, and professional language needs. Project-based and debate-oriented learning can strengthen communication, collaboration, confidence, and critical thinking, while ESP-oriented instruction can help bridge the gap between classroom English and workplace communication demands (Buhaeri et al., 2026; Sari et al., 2026; Wigati & Pujiawati, 2026). In this study, the participants' experiences similarly show that career readiness develops when students are given opportunities to use English in realistic, interactive, and professionally relevant contexts. Taken together, these findings show that career readiness is developed through the interaction of language competence, confidence, authentic practice, and career-oriented communicative experience. Students need more than knowledge of English structures; they need opportunities to use English in situations that resemble future professional demands.

Practical Implications for Higher Education

The findings offer several practical implications for higher education institutions. First, English Education programs should provide career-oriented English practice across the curriculum, not only in speaking or writing courses. This can include mock job interviews, workplace presentations, professional email writing, academic-to-professional translation tasks, classroom simulations, and problem-solving discussions based on real workplace scenarios. Second, universities should create low-risk English-speaking environments where students can practice spontaneous communication without excessive fear of grammatical mistakes. Third, collaboration with alumni, employers, international partners, and professional communities can provide students with more authentic exposure to English use beyond classroom assignments. Fourth, students' progress should be supported through reflective portfolios, staged performance goals, peer feedback, and mentoring so that they can recognize gradual improvement and maintain

motivation. These strategies may help bridge the gap between academic English learning and post-study career readiness. The study is limited by its small, homogeneous sample from one postgraduate program. This limitation is consistent with the idiographic purpose of IPA, but the findings should be transferred cautiously to other institutions and student groups. Future research could compare students from different programs or regions, examine institutional practices that provide authentic professional exposure, and follow graduates longitudinally as they move from university into employment.

4. Conclusion

This study explored how master's students in English Education experienced the development of English skills for Post-Study Career Readiness. The study successfully answered the research objective by identifying four interconnected challenges that shaped students' perceived preparedness: anxiety in high-stakes communication, a mismatch between academic learning and workplace demands, limited access to authentic practice, and declining motivation when professional standards appeared unreachable. These findings show that career-related English development is not solely a matter of linguistic knowledge. It is also shaped by professional identity, opportunities for meaningful interaction, self-confidence, and students' ability to view future goals as attainable. English Education programs should therefore integrate realistic professional communication, unscripted practice, workplace exposure, and affective support across the curriculum. Further studies involving other institutions and longitudinal follow-up after graduation would clarify how these experiences change when students enter actual professional environments.

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