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Employer Expectations of Language at the Workplace

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to determine the language skills and competencies which a group of university students need at the workplace and to investigate if their career needs are being met by the existing English language programmes at the university. Data for the analysis were gathered through a questionnaire survey of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) alumni and structured interviews with representatives of related

industries. The findings of the study indicate that English is widely used in the organisations surveyed because workplace tasks and transactions are carried out in English. All the four skills of speaking, writing, reading and listening are required for these tasks. In view of this, it is essential for graduates to be proficient in English to secure employment as well as to perform efficiently at work. However, most of them experience difficulties carrying out everyday workplace tasks due to a lack of proficiency in and mastery of the language. Their problems lie mainly in the area of speaking and writing skills. It is thus recommended that English courses for the workplace include authentic materials which focus on speaking and writing skills.

KEYWORDS: English at the workplace; Needs Analysis; industry; proficiency; language skills

Introduction

At Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), all students in the diploma programmes take English language proficiency courses in the first three semesters of their programme. They are required to pass all three levels of their proficiency courses. All students in the degree programmes from these faculties are required to obtain a minimum of between two to four of their total credits from English language courses. Despite such emphasis on the English language, graduates from public universities like UiTM still find communication in English a challenge at the workplace. They still face problems with

the various job-related tasks that require speaking, writing, reading and listening in the language. Upon securing a job after graduation, they find that the English they learn in school and at university does not prepare them to use the language at the workplace. They face difficulties in carrying out tasks such as preparing reports, participating in meetings or giving presentations. Most of them lack confidence in their own ability to use English. In fact, many graduates are not able to secure any job because they cannot function adequately in English. Given the high rate of unemployment among graduates (see for example *70% Public University Graduates Jobless*, 2006), this is indeed a worrying trend.

In cognizance of this, there is a dire need for universities, including UiTM, to re-examine their English language curriculum periodically to ensure that the language programmes encompass the appropriate language skills needed by industry. At UiTM, the Academy of Language Studies (APB) is tasked with delivering appropriate language courses that meet the academic and workplace needs of its graduates. It falls upon APB to re-evaluate the career needs of students in the various disciplines and at the same time establish the English language skills required by graduating students. The present study focuses on graduates from the field of Social Sciences and Humanities at UiTM with the aim of addressing the following research questions:

- How important is English at the workplace in industries that employ graduates in the field of Social Sciences and Humanities?
- What types of professional tasks are carried out in English in the industries that employ graduates in this field?
- What type of English language skills do employers look for in the graduates they employ?

Literature Review

In keeping with the demands of globalisation, it is imperative that students in tertiary education have a good command of the English language in order to obtain jobs of their choice and to have a successful career. Graduates from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities need to be equipped with the necessary language skills needed to ensure that they are employable. A Needs Analysis can help determine the English language skills required by graduates in the field of Social Sciences and Humanities at the workplace and to establish the extent to which these language skills are being met by existing English language programmes at UiTM.

In order to ensure an effective language programme, educators should pay special attention to the objectives, goals, teaching methodologies and teaching materials and activities to be included in the programme. A Needs Analysis will help to determine what should be included in the programme. According to Nunan (1988), a Needs Analysis can be viewed as a set of procedures to gather information about learners and the type of learning tasks to be used in the teaching process as part of designing a syllabus. Richards and Rodgers (1988) also see it as an instrument that is used as part of the process of curriculum development. These researchers agree that a Needs Analysis forms the basis to develop goals, objectives and types of teaching/learning activities that are to be used in a language programme. The researchers are also of the opinion that a Needs Analysis can be used to evaluate the outcome of a given language programme. For the purpose of this research, a Needs Analysis was carried out to find out the language needs of learners from the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities at their workplace.

In reviewing an existing curriculum, it is important that the desired expectations of related industries be taken into consideration so that current students will be more marketable when they enter the job market. A Needs Analysis can help to identify the criteria that these industries have for their employees' performance objectives in using English in the workplace. At the same time, it can also help to provide the employees with the skills that would enable them to perform better at the workplace.

Previous studies have pointed out to the lack of English language proficiency among UiTM graduates. For example, Yap, Ong and Teng (2002) found that UiTM graduates were “only moderately proficient in both oral and written English” and that more than 50% of employers did not have a high regard of the graduates’ written proficiency. Similarly, Pereira, Louis and Lok (2002) in a study of the employers’ of the English Language proficiency of BBA graduates from UiTM, Shah Alam also found that these graduates lack confidence in oral communication especially in interviews and oral presentations, and this was attributed to a lack of motivation to improve. The employers surveyed cited speaking in English as the most important skill followed by writing. In another study, Hawa Rohany (2003) conducted a Needs Analysis study of the use of the English language and other languages among working professionals and reported that qualities which give professionals the competitive edge in their job is self-confidence and effective oral communication skills in presenting ideas and information.

In order for graduates to be proficient in English, it is crucial that they are equipped with language skills, namely the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. Once graduates are adequately equipped with these language skills, they will be able to perform well in their respective job tasks. As such, language programmes offered in universities have to be designed to include adequate practice in reading, speaking,

listening and writing skills. These skills are equally important and are normally practised by students in different combinations or all at the same time. It is important to note that different language programmes may have different content emphasis. For example, the focus of a course may be business correspondence, report writing or interviews. However, effort should be made to ensure that what is taught in the course is related to authentic office situations. This will ensure that the skills practised by students will be similar to those used in the workplace environments.

According to Flowerdew (1993), to function professionally in the business world, there is a need to participate in a whole range of genres. For instance, a public relations officer's job specifications will include a whole range of duties such as conducting customer-client interviews, organising press conferences, oral presentations and writing reports and letters. In order to carry out these jobs effectively, employees need to have mastery of not only the content areas but also the requisite reading, speaking, listening and writing skills.

Methodology

A questionnaire was sent out to ten selected companies. These companies were selected as they were current and previous employers of graduates from the field of Social Sciences and Humanities. They included employers in the areas of law, education, advertising, mass media and administration and management. All the employers responded to the questionnaires sent to them.

A total of 59 alumni who graduated from the field of Social Sciences and Humanities also responded to a separate questionnaire. They included managing directors, lawyers, researchers, lecturers, teachers, public relations officers, publishing officers, copywriters, producers, graphic designers, administrators and communication executives.

One questionnaire was prepared for the employers while another questionnaire was drawn up for the alumni for the purpose of this study. The set of questions for the employers was distributed to selected companies that either had UiTM graduates from this field in their employ or had employed them previously. The alumni questionnaire was distributed to UiTM alumni who had graduated from this field between the years 1986 and 2005 with the majority of them having graduated between 2000 and 2005.

The questionnaire for the employers was distributed to the companies personally by the researchers. Once the companies that employed or had employed UiTM graduates from the field of Social Sciences and Humanities were identified through the UiTM alumni association, the researchers went to these organisations to personally distribute the questionnaires. The distribution took place between January and February 2006.

There were two sections in the employers' questionnaire. The questions in the first section sought to obtain general information such as the name of the organisation and designation of the respondent. The questions in the second section were designed to elicit information on the following:

- English language usage in the organisation
- Tasks that require the use of English in the organisation
- Problems employees face in carrying out tasks in English
- Measures taken by employers to help employees who face difficulties in the usage of English

The alumni questionnaire was divided into six sections. The six sections had the following headings:

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Section A: Personal Information

Section B: English Courses Taken at UiTM

Section C: Job Search

Section D: Using English at Work

Section E: Relevance of UiTM English Language Courses to Present Job Requirements

Section F: Comments and Suggestions

The data collected from the alumni were analysed with the use of SPSS. The data were tabulated and coded, after which, they were computed and presented in the form of frequencies and percentages. The data collected from the employers were analysed using frequency counts since the number of respondents for employers was small.

Results and Discussion

Based on the feedback obtained, English is the lingua franca of the workplace in Malaysia, and as such, it plays an important role in the organisations. Firstly, in all the organisations surveyed, English is widely used, either as the main language or bilingually with Malay, Mandarin or Tamil. In addition, 80% of the employers also revealed that

being proficient in English is an important criterion in the recruitment of staff in their organisations and 50% of these employers use English as a criterion in the performance appraisal of their staff. All the ten employers further attested that having proficiency in English is vital for employees to carry out their work effectively in their organisations. In all the organisations surveyed, most of the functions and tasks routinely performed in the workplace are conducted in English.

Secondly, for the alumni of UiTM, it is apparent that proficiency in English is essential in looking for a job upon leaving the university and to function at the workplace. About 80% of the respondents write application letters and resumes in English, and were interviewed in English. In addition, more than one-third of the respondents look up advertisements for job vacancies as well as make inquiries of prospective employers in English. At the workplace itself, as employees involved in the day-to-day business of the organisation, the respondents stated that all the tasks at work are carried out in English.

Lastly, in the recommendations and general comments that they contributed, the employers surveyed emphasised the importance of enhancing the English proficiency of UiTM graduates in order to equip them with the language skills needed at the workplace. Feedback from both employers and alumni of UiTM shows that to be employed in these

organisations and to perform well as employees, it is essential for graduates of UiTM to be proficient in English.

Based on the Needs Analysis, it was learnt that a wide range of workplace tasks are carried out in English. In all the organisations surveyed, *making or receiving phone calls; giving or receiving instructions* and *conducting interviews* are carried out in English. In nine of the organisations, many tasks are done in English, namely, *interacting with colleagues, clients and customers; participating in meetings and discussions; negotiating; socialising with colleagues; networking with clients/customers; writing letters, memos, e-mail; writing notices, agenda and minutes; preparing contracts/documents; and interpreting and translating documents*. In eight of the organisations, the following tasks are done in English: *oral presentations; conducting press conferences; writing reports; reading contracts/reports; conducting research*, while in seven organisations, *brochures/advertisements* are also produced in English (see Table 1).

Table 1: Tasks Conducted in English

Frequency Percent

Making/receiving phone calls	10	100.0
Giving/receiving instructions	10	100.0
Conducting interviews	10	100.0
Interacting with colleagues, clients and customers	9	90.0
Participating in meetings	9	90.0
Participating in discussions	9	90.0
Negotiating	9	90.0
Socialising with colleagues	9	90.0
Networking with clients/customers	9	90.0
Writing letters, memos, e-mail	9	90.0
Writing notices, agenda and minutes	9	90.0
Preparing contracts/documents	9	90.0
Interpreting and translating documents	9	90.0
Making oral presentations	8	80.0
Holding press conferences	8	80.0

Writing reports	8	80.0
Reading contracts/reports	8	80.0
Conducting research	8	80.0
Preparing brochures/advertisements	7	70.0

Similarly, workplace tasks which the graduates say they frequently carry out in English are *receiving instructions, reading contracts, reports, instructions, documents, filling in forms, taking messages, answering the telephone, interacting with colleagues, clients, bosses, writing memos, participating in and holding meetings, giving instructions, writing letters and writing reports*. These tasks are frequently carried out in English as they involve communication with other individuals at work or with clients who use English.

Apart from this, the tasks which graduates say they do less frequently in English are as follows: *making presentations, conducting research, interpreting and translating, preparing contracts and documents, preparing brochures, conducting interviews and holding press conferences*. Thus, from the findings, *receiving instructions* appears to be the task which is most frequently conducted in English and *holding press conferences* the least.

However, if we take a closer look at the tasks which are reportedly done less frequently, in particular *conducting interviews* and *holding press conferences*, we may find that these are tasks that may be categorised as those normally performed by higher-ranking staff in an organisation. Hence, the higher mean scores of these tasks may not necessarily imply that English is used less frequently. As most of the alumni respondents are in the 20-29 age group, having graduated between 2000 and 2005 and with ten years or less of working experience, it is more likely that they are either not involved or less involved in these tasks, as they may not have yet attained positions of higher responsibility in their organisation. In general, a wide variety of tasks, ranging from the simple to the more complex, are carried out in English in the organisations which employ graduates from the field of Social Sciences and Humanities.

The analysis then focused on the type of English language skills graduates need at the workplace. From the perspective of the UiTM alumni, all the four language skills of speaking, writing, listening and reading are considered important to be effective at work, in particular, speaking and writing skills. The ability to speak and write proficiently in English is essential, as shown in data on the use of English in the workplace, where English is found to be frequently used in the following tasks which require a facility in these skills: *taking messages; answering the telephone; interacting with colleagues,*

clients, bosses; writing memos; participating in and holding meetings; giving instructions; writing letters and writing reports.

However, the respondents indicate that they have problems mainly in *writing reports, interpreting and translating (Malay to English), holding press conferences and interacting with colleagues, clients and bosses* in English, tasks which will require them to be proficient in the language and have adequate speaking and writing skills. In addition, in their job search, about two-thirds of the respondents indicated they were confident communicating in English and were able to express themselves clearly and fluently in English during job interviews. It can be assumed that the rest, comprising more than 30% of the respondents, lack the ability to communicate well in English (see Table 2).

Table 2: Difficulty in Performing Tasks due to a Lack of English Proficiency

Tasks	Frequency	Percent
Writing reports	9	80.0
Interpreting and translating documents	9	90.0

Writing letters, memos, e-mail	8	90.0
Negotiating	7	70.0
Holding press conferences	7	70.0
Writing notices, agenda and minutes	7	70.0
Conducting research	7	70.0
Making oral presentations	6	60.0
Participating in meetings	6	60.0
Giving/receiving instructions	6	60.0
Preparing brochures/advertisements	6	60.0
Interacting with colleagues, clients and customers	5	50.0
Participating in discussions	5	50.0
Networking with clients/customers	5	50.0
Reading contracts/reports	5	50.0
Socialising with colleagues	4	40.0

Conducting interviews	4	40.0
Making/receiving phone calls	4	40.0
Preparing contracts/documents	4	40.0

Likewise, the employers surveyed indicated that most of the workplace tasks in the industry require employees to have speaking, writing, listening and reading skills in English. They too perceive employees to have the most difficulty in *writing reports* and *interpreting and translating documents*. Among other tasks employees are also perceived to have problems in *are writing letters, memos, e-mail; writing notices, agenda and minutes; preparing contracts/documents; making oral presentations; holding press conferences* and *reading contracts/reports*. These are job functions which entail knowledge of workplace procedures apart from analytical and language skills, all of which employers often look for in graduates entering the workforce.

The findings of this study are consistent with those in the study conducted by Pereira, Louis and Lok (2002) which showed that speaking and writing are the most common

skills used by graduates at the workplace. They are also consistent with Hawa Rohany's (2003) findings that oral communication skills are important at the workplace.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As they prepare to be gainfully employed and upon being employed, it is necessary for graduates of UiTM to be proficient in the English Language as revealed in the study. English is the main language in the organizations surveyed and employees are required to carry out most workplace tasks in English. It is thus important for them to be proficient in English and have acquired speaking, writing, reading and listening skills. The respondents of the survey, that is, both the employers and alumni, however, indicate that UiTM graduates have problems performing many of the tasks, in particular, those which involve speaking or writing. Although all the alumni respondents acknowledge that a proficiency in English is essential, they lack the confidence to communicate in English and several expressed a desire to improve in their command of the language.

Based on the findings of the study, it can be seen that, generally, UiTM graduates have difficulties in carrying out workplace tasks in English, especially those which involve the productive skills: writing and speaking. They lack proficiency in English and see a need to improve in communication skills, grammar and vocabulary, among others.

In order to help UiTM students improve in these areas, it is recommended that language enhancement courses which focus on proficiency and grammatical accuracy be implemented at all levels of students' course of study. As they become more proficient in the language, they would subsequently be more confident in handling workplace tasks.

For this purpose, English language courses which focus on speaking and writing can be offered to both diploma and degree students. These courses should also focus on confidence-building activities, job-related as well as in social situations. Extensive reading should also be carried out to develop and consolidate students' skills, apart from helping them to acquire vocabulary and critical thinking skills. Finally, it is recommended that English courses for the workplace, incorporating authentic materials and job prospecting skills, be offered to all UiTM students.

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