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English Language Oral Communication Needs at the Workplace: Feedback from Human Resource Development (HRD) Trainees

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Abstract

The most essential skill that employers look for is the ability to speak effectively in English. This ability is especially true of sectors, namely the Human Resource Development (HRD), where communication at the internal and external level is an important requirement of the job. Previous studies in Malaysia have found that members of staff often face problems such as speaking fluently and presenting in front of a large audience. This paper reports on an investigation of English Language Oral Communication (ELOC) needs of HRD undergraduates from a public university in the Southern part of Malaysia. The findings identified the specific oral communicative events and skills required by HRD trainees at the workplace.

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1. Introduction

The role of English language is important for communication between people especially in higher institutions and businesses in Malaysia. Since English is the second language in Malaysia, the concentration is on generating learners with the ability to communicate effectively in different social and professional contexts. Currently in Malaysia, communication skills play the fundamental role at workplace situations. The importance of communication skills is significant in the management sector as stated in different job advertisements. Without efficient communication skills in the management sector, a manager would never achieve success [15].

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According to Clagett [3], in communication, the most important area is oral communication skills in English language which all graduates should possess to guarantee that they can function efficiently at the workplace. Realising that this critical soft skill increases graduates’ employability, higher institutions in Malaysia are gearing their efforts toward improving the oral communication skills of their undergraduates.

In the context of workplace communication, having good communication skills is the way to success and that good communication skills are seen as fundamental and an additional advantage [9]. In the perspective of Stivers [14], oral communication skill in English is an important skill for managers to possess in order to carry out tasks efficiently at the workplace. In a study by Kasim and Ali [5], the significant role of oral communication skills in multinational companies was reported by between 71 to 80 percent of the respondents. They ranked the usage of oral communication skills in multinational companies as follows; telephone conversation, informal work related discussions, meetings, giving oral presentations, explaining and demonstrating to subordinates and other colleagues. Higher Institutions in Malaysia are seeking to generate creative managers in different fields to meet the needs of thriving resources in various situations. In fact, at present, one of the key objectives in Malaysian higher institutions is to generate large number of graduates with high ability to communicate effectively at the workplace [10]. To achieve this goal, higher institutions are attempting to design language programs with a focus on communicative skills.

In recent years, the importance of equipping employers with good oral communication skills in English has grown with the demanding nature of current workplace communication. Stevens [13] reported that employers believed that a low proficiency language skill was a difficult factor for employment. He also maintained that many students with low proficiency English language skills cannot be employed because of clients’ expectations. In the workplace contexts, employees need oral communication skills in English language to be successful in their jobs as they must carry out different communicative tasks such as presentations, meetings and negotiations. According to Blair and Jeanson [1], a high proficiency in English language, especially in oral communication skills would be valuable to solve different problems that take place in workplace situations. Unfortunately, according to Smith [12], despite the professional and formal training given to students and graduates, there is still a skill gap in workplace situations. It is mentioned that there are significant gaps between the expectations of industries and what the universities offer to the students.

HR management is one of the in-demand sectors of management in Malaysia. Traditionally, HRD officers execute the organizational purpose of an organization; for instance, drafting, interviewing and hiring new staff [5]. However, since the role of English as the global language or lingua franca in both multinational and many local companies in Malaysia has increased dramatically, HRD officers now must be able to communicate effectively - more so than what was expected of them in the past – both inside and outside the workplace. Thus, HRD employers find themselves in circumstances in which the ability to communicate well is crucial in order to function effectively at the workplace. Furthermore, according to MacNamara [8], HRD related work involves a variety of activities. The main activity involves making decisions on the needs of the company; for example, whether to use independent suppliers or hire employees to fill these needs; and also to convince personnel and management practices to keep to a variety of systems. In addition, the HRD sector also supervises the companies’ approach to employee settlements, compensations, employee records, and personnel strategies [8].

Kassim and Ali [5], however, reported that many staff, including those in the HRD sector, face problems in communicating well in English and often encounter problems speaking fluently in meetings, delivering public speaking and giving oral presentations. The aforementioned study was conducted on HR multinational companies in Malaysia to examine their English communication needs. The findings of the study highlighted the need for graduates to equip themselves with oral communication skills to ensure that they can function effectively at the workplace. Previous discussions have shown that communication problems at the workplace are related to low proficiency in English language [13] and the skill gaps between the expectations of industries and what the universities offer to the students [12]. The problems faced by existing staff in multinational companies [6] include difficulty in expressing views and ideas at the workplace by nonnative speakers of English. Therefore,
this paper will report on an investigation into the oral communication needs of HRD undergraduates at the workplace.

2. Methodology

This study utilized a set questionnaire as the data collection instrument which was adopted from questionnaires used in two previous needs analysis studies. The first is a study on the needs analysis of the English communication skills of final year Electrical Engineering undergraduates in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, the same university in which this study was undertaken. The second study is on the oral communication skills in English which focused on matching the skills developed at the university with the need and demand of the Industry [11]. The adopted questionnaire for the purpose of this study contained two parts. Part A included questions on the respondents’ personal profiles. Part B consists of questions which addressed the ELOC needs of HRD trainees. The respondents were expected to reflect on their recent industrial training experience. The questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively for frequency scores and percentages to obtain the information on the ELOC needs of HRD undergraduates from the trainees’ perspective. The questionnaire was distributed to 136 HRD undergraduates in UTM who, at that time, had recently undergone their practical training at different multinational and local companies in Malaysia.

3. Results

3.1. Importance of oral communication skills in general

![Fig.1. The importance of the oral communication skills at the workplace](image)

The given diagram illustrates the importance of oral communication skills at the workplace for HRD trainees from the trainees’ perspective. The figures show that in general, most of the trainees perceive the ELOC skills as either important or very important. As many as 41.9 percent of the trainees considered oral communication skills at the work place to be important, while 35.3 percent regarded it as very important. On the other hand, only 19.9 percent of the respondents view oral communication skills as only somewhat important. An even smaller percentage (2.9%) of the respondents considered speaking skills as not very important. These percentages clearly
point to the importance of furnishing graduates with the necessary oral communication skills to function effectively at the workplace.

3.2. Importance of English language in specific communicative activities

Table 1 illustrates in detail the responses obtained with regard to the importance of the different activities in English language.

| Table 1. The importance of different activities in English language |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Activity | not very important | somewhat important | Important | very important |
|----------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------|---------------|
|          | No    | %    | No    | %    | No    | %    | No    | %    |
| Discussing projects, proposals, plans, designs, etc | 21    | 15.7 | 41    | 30   | 35    | 25.7 | 39    | 28.6 |
| Reporting problems | 12    | 9    | 39    | 28.6 | 48    | 35.2 | 37    | 27.2 |
| Making formal oral presentations on projects, proposals, plans, designs, etc | 5    | 3.9  | 39    | 28.6 | 51    | 37.5 | 41    | 30   |
| Making and arguing for an issue before superiors or colleagues | 3    | 2.4  | 30    | 22   | 58    | 42.6 | 45    | 33   |
| Giving face-to-face instructions to subordinates | 4    | 3    | 37    | 27.2 | 44    | 32.3 | 51    | 37.5 |
| Speaking on the telephone with colleagues about job related matters | 6    | 4.5  | 49    | 36   | 43    | 31.6 | 38    | 27.9 |
| Speaking on the telephone with clients about job related matters | 4    | 3    | 38    | 27.9 | 48    | 35.2 | 46    | 33.9 |
| Establishing social relationships with colleagues (including subordinates and superior) | 14    | 10.4 | 43    | 31.6 | 54    | 39.7 | 25    | 18.3 |
| Establishing social relationships with clients | 3    | 2.4  | 26    | 19   | 41    | 30   | 66    | 48.6 |
| Providing training through discussions, workshops, etc | 4    | 3    | 35    | 25.7 | 46    | 33.9 | 51    | 37.5 |
| Sum     | 76    | 5.6  | 377   | 27.7 | 468   | 34.4 | 439   | 32.3 |

As shown in the above figures, the three most important communicative activities in English language as perceived by the trainees is establishing social relationships with clients, making and arguing for an issue before superiors or colleagues and providing training through discussions, workshops, etc. For the first activity, 48.6 percent of the trainees regarding this activity to be very important and 30 percent considered it important. The remaining 19 percent and 2.4 percent of the trainees perceived it to be somewhat important and not very important respectively. The second most important activity is making and arguing for an issue before superiors or colleagues. 33 percent of the trainees regarded this activity to be very important, and as high as 42.6 percent considered it as important. The remaining 22 percent perceived it as only somewhat important and only 2.4 percent reported the activity as not very important. The third activity perceived to be important is providing training through discussions, workshops, etc. More than 70 percent of the trainees regarded this particular type of
communicative activity as either very important (37.5%) or important (33.9%). A lower percentage (25.7%) of the respondents see this activity as only somewhat important. While a very small number of the trainees (3%) considered the activity as not very important.

There are also three oral communicative activities that are considered moderately important activities in English Language as apparent by the trainees namely; making formal oral presentations, using face to face instructions to subordinates, and speaking on the phone with colleagues. On the other hand, the three communicative activities that are considered less important that the ones already discussed are reporting problems, discussing projects, proposals, plans, designs, etc. and establishing social relationships with colleagues (including subordinates and superior). The first activity which was considered as less important and which only 27.2 percent of the trainees regarded as very important is reporting problems, while a slightly higher percentage (35.2 %) considered it as important. As many as 28.6 percent of the trainees viewed it as somewhat important, while a minority of the respondents (9%) considered reporting problems as an activity that is not very important. The second activity regarded as less important from the perspective of the trainees is discussing projects, proposals, plans, designs, etc. Slightly more than 50 percent of the trainees reported this activity as either very important (28.6%) or important (25.7%) at the workplace. In contrast, a slightly higher percentage (30%) of the trainees considered it to be somewhat important, while a much smaller percentage (15.7 %) perceived this to be an activity that is not very important. The last communicative activity which is considered as the least important activity in the perspective of the trainees is establishing social relationships with colleagues (including subordinates and superior). Only 18.3 percent of the trainees stated this as very important. However, a higher percentage (39.7%) of the trainees considered this an important activity while a slightly higher percentage (31.6%) of the trainees considered it as somewhat important. Finally, only 10.4 percent of the respondents regarded establishing social relationships as not very important.

3.3. Frequency of encountering problems during the practical training

Table 2 provides an overview of the different oral communication problems faced by trainees and the frequency in which they encounter these problems at the workplace.

| Q. 12 | never | Seldom | sometimes | frequently | always |
|-------|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
|       | No    | %      | No    | %          | No    | %    | No    | %      |
| Arguing persuasively | 41 | 30.2 | 34 | 25 | 23 | 16.9 | 21 | 15.4 | 17 | 12.5 |
| Explaining logically | 58 | 42.6 | 19 | 14 | 36 | 26.4 | 17 | 12.5 | 6 | 4.5 |
| Speaking fluently | 11 | 8.2 | 34 | 25 | 45 | 33.1 | 27 | 19.7 | 19 | 14 |
| Supporting opinions | 12 | 9 | 34 | 25 | 49 | 36 | 28 | 20.5 | 13 | 9.5 |
| Asking for clarifications | 14 | 10.2 | 31 | 22.7 | 47 | 34.5 | 29 | 21.3 | 15 | 11 |
| Giving clarifications | 38 | 28 | 39 | 28.8 | 29 | 21.6 | 19 | 14 | 11 | 8.2 |
| Paraphrasing | 48 | 35.3 | 38 | 28 | 22 | 16.2 | 18 | 13.2 | 10 | 7.3 |
| Facilitating discussions/negotiations | 14 | 10.2 | 35 | 25.8 | 43 | 31.6 | 25 | 18.4 | 19 | 14 |
| Organizing ideas during oral presentations | 43 | 31.6 | 23 | 16.9 | 39 | 28.8 | 19 | 14 | 12 | 9 |
From the figures shown in Table 4.2, the top three oral communication problems encountered by the trainees during their industrial training attachment are **speaking fluently, asking for clarifications and supporting opinions**. It is clear that speaking fluently is a problem faced by most of the trainees. In fact, 14 percent of the respondents stated that they always encountered this problem while a slightly higher percentage (19.7%) faces this problem on a frequent basis. More than half of the trainees (58%) encountered this problem (33.1%) sometimes, while 25 percent of the trainees seldom face problem speaking fluently in English. While only a small number (8.2 percent) of the respondents have never faced this problem during their industrial training period. It is interesting to note that the trainees hardly face problems explaining things in a logical manner. Based on the figures, only a small group (4.5 percent) of the respondents reported having *always* encountered this problem and a higher percentage (12.5%) of the trainees reported having frequently face problems with explaining things logically. In contrast, 42.6 percent has never faced this problem. 26.4 percent of the trainees reported having faced this problem sometimes and the remaining 14 percent seldom encountered this. In addition, the other communicative activities which trainees encountered problems with include **arguing persuasively, organizing ideas during oral presentations, giving clarifications, and paraphrasing**. However, these problems are reported by most of the trainees as something they either encountered *sometimes* or as problems they seldom faced.

### 3.4 Future Emphasis

Table 4.3 below lists the oral communication skills in English and the trainees’ perception of the emphasis that should be given for the different oral skills in future English language courses for HRD undergraduates.

#### Table 3. The Overall Emphasis on Oral Communication Skills for Future HRD Trainees

| Q. 13                  | **strong** |            | **minor** |            |
|------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|------------|
|                        | No         | %          | No        | %          |
| Oral presentation skills | 93         | 68.4       | 43        | 31.6       |
| Discussion skills      | 82         | 60.3       | 54        | 39.7       |
| Negotiation skills     | 81         | 59.5       | 55        | 40.5       |
| Briefing skills        | 69         | 50.7       | 67        | 49.3       |
| Meetings               | 79         | 58.1       | 57        | 41.9       |
| Telephone skills       | 61         | 44.8       | 75        | 55.2       |
| Conversation skills    | 94         | 69.1       | 42        | 30.9       |
| Pronunciations         | 70         | 51.4       | 66        | 48.6       |
| Sum                    | 629        | 459        |           |            |
From the above figures, from the perception of the trainees, the three skills they considered required the most emphasis are **conversation skills, oral presentation skills, and discussion skills**. The first skill that should be given strong emphasis is **conversation skills**, with 69.1 percent of the respondents indicating that it should be given the most emphasis with the remaining 30.9 percent stating that it should only be given minor emphasis. On the other hand, the trainees believed that telephone skills should be given the least emphasis. In contrast, 44.8 percent of the respondents felt it required strong emphasis and a slightly higher percentage (55.2 %) felt it required minor emphasis. The other skills are **oral presentation skills**, **discussion skills**, **negotiation skills** , **meetings**, **pronunciation**, and **briefing skills**. In general, the respondents agreed that all these skills should be given focus but of different emphasis.

4. Discussion

From the findings, it is clear that the trainees view oral communication skills as significantly important skills for the workplace. This is in line with a study by Kassim and Ali [5] conducted on HR staff in multinational companies in Malaysia. They found that the oral skills at the workplace are considered to be either very important or important skills to possess. From the perspective of HRD students, different activities in English language are important. Based on the data in this study, the most important activity in English language is **establishing social relationships with clients** with almost 80 percent of the trainees in this study citing it as important. This is not surprising as the nature of most business communication will involve communicating with clients or customers. However, establishing a good rapport with clients or customers can be considered as very important as this will eventually have implications on the company’s income and profit. **Making and arguing for an issue before superiors or colleagues** is the other activity which is important in the trainees’ perception. Like other managerial positions, positions as HRD officers or managers will be involved in problem solving and decision making discussions which require them to offer solutions, agree and to disagree as well as to convince others [5, 8].

It is also interesting to note that the trainees believed that **establishing social relationships with colleagues (including subordinates and superior)** is the least important activity in English language. This can be considered rather unusual as an important part of the HRD officer’s job involves managing other members of staff. Perhaps the trainees feel that this can still be achieved by establishing relationships on a professional level. In addition, in their perspective, **discussion of projects, proposals, plans, designs, etc.** is another communication activity in which it is not so important. Perhaps, unlike professions such as engineering or architecture, whereby a great deal of an engineer or architect’s time revolves around planning, executing and managing projects, the work requirement of the HRD officers or managers may revolve more around the management of people and aspects related to manpower. As such discussions related to projects, proposals, plans and designs will not be such a common or important communicative activity and this is reflected in the trainees’ view.

In addition, based on the information obtained in this study, the event which the students mostly face problem with is speaking fluently in the English language. On the other hand, trainees seldom They also sometimes encountered the problem with explaining logically. On the other hand, “paraphrasing” is the activity which they felt they seldom face problem with. The results of this study are consistent with the results of a study by Kassim and Ali [5] who conducted a study on HR staff in multinational companies in Malaysia. They reported that staff often face problem with speaking fluently in front of an audience such as in meetings or while giving presentations.

This study was also interested in finding out the different skills the trainees perceived should be emphasized in future HRD courses. The findings suggest that most of the students believed that strong emphasis should be given to acquiring conversation skills and oral presentation skills. This is not surprising as the respondents had
indicated earlier that they often encounter problems speaking fluently especially when speaking in front of an audience. Skills which respondents of this study feel required only minor emphasis in HRD courses are telephone skills and briefing skills.

5. Conclusion

From the discussions of the findings obtained from this study, three main conclusions can be drawn with regard to the ELOC needs of HRD trainees. First of all, in the HRD trainees' perception, oral communication skills play a crucial role at the workplace. In addition among the most important communicative activities include establishing social relationships with clients, making and arguing for an issue before superiors or colleagues, and providing training through discussions, workshops, etc. The perception of the trainees clearly reported that they often face problems speaking fluently and speaking in front of an audience. In addition, trainees perceive that “conversation skills”, “oral presentation skills”, and “discussion skills” are skills which must be given emphasis in English language courses. The findings provide important input to course developers in their efforts to develop new course or improving on existing courses geared at HRD undergraduates.

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