

Exposing Students to Industrial Experience through Workplace Exposure Project for Business Communication

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to describe the implementation of a business communication project called Workplace Exposure Project (WEP). The project involved 36 students requiring them to have an industrial site visit (s) and conducting a semi-structured interview as well as observation. Students were required to find out about business communication practices employed by the chosen company and to write their reflections before, during and after the WEP. Prior to the WEP, they had to obtain permission from relevant parties in order to gain entry into the organisation. Finally, the students had to present their findings to the class orally and submit a written portfolio. Through their reflections, it was indicated that the students enjoyed the learning process using this method as it exposed them to real industrial experience of having an encounter(s) with people from a real business entity and giving them the opportunity and confidence to practice their English language skills. Concurrently, the university was also able to identify the performance of the students as perceived by the employers/business owners. The paper concludes with teaching implications for business communication and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Business communication practices, industrial experience, academic, English skills, teaching methodology

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The teaching of business communication today is expected to meet the demands of the industry. While much has been said about this, how many business communication teachers are practising entrepreneurs themselves? To fill this gap, a project which is based on experiential learning theories and learner-centred approach was assigned to a group of business communication students. To ensure that the learning experience is not only limited to classroom practices, this project was designed to expose the students to industrial experience by having them conduct industrial visits to their preferred industrial sites.

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In Malaysia, English language plays a dominant role in business. Graduates who would like to be involved in the business sector, whether working as an employee or being business owners themselves, have to be proficient in the language. By carrying out the project, students had the opportunity to visualize the use of English at the workplace as well.

The aim of this the paper is to describe the pedagogical aspect and underlying theories in the teaching of business communication. It describes the implementation of a business communication project called Workplace Exposure Project (WEP) as part of their coursework requirement. It reveals the students' experiences in acquiring a taste of industrial experience through this project which will benefit them in their future career.

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Two main theories are fundamental to this research; the first is Kolb's Experiential Learning Style Theory (1984) and the second is Carl Rogers' Experiential Learning Theory.

Experiential learning is learning through real life experience. Kolb (1984) states that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". He came up with a theory called Kolb's Experiential Learning Style theory consisting of four stages of learning cycle: (1) concrete experience; (2) reflective observation; (3) abstract conceptualization; and (4) active experimentation (see Fig.1). This theory suggests that effective learning will take place when a person passes through the four stages. It requests the learner to go through the experience, reflect about it, think and take actions in a recurring process in a cycle as a result of his learning situation and what has been learnt. A learner gains concrete experience when he/she is actively involved in the experience by performing/implementing certain activities. By using reflective observation, the learner knowingly reflects upon and draws conclusion based on his/her experience. The next stage will enable the learner to make abstract conceptualisation. In this stage, the learner can formulate abstract concepts such as a theory or model, and based on this, make generalisations or conclusions. In the last cycle, that is active experimentation, having the generalisations as guidelines, the learner will then test his/her hypotheses in different situations (Kolb, 1976).

Chan (2012) points out that traditional classroom based learning which helps students develop their theoretical knowledge within the confines of the classroom supplements experiential learning which empowers students with individualised experiences and skills which are developed outside the classroom.

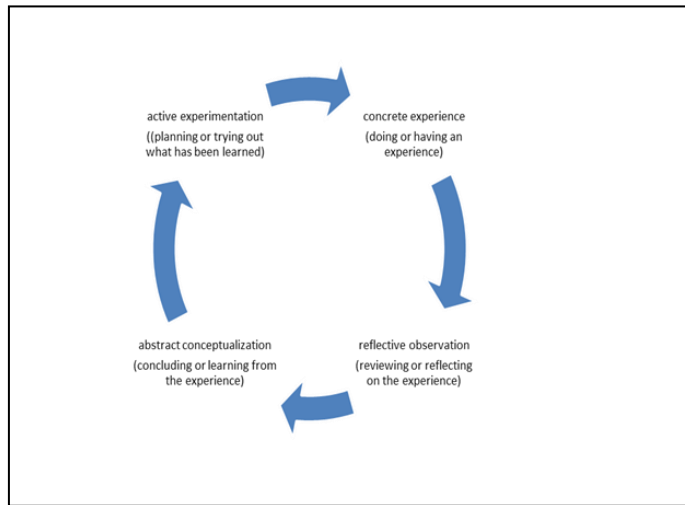


Figure 1 Kolb's Learning Cycle

Experiential learning and the process of education is said to be encouraging in terms of its effects (Percy, 2013). Further, Percy (2013) points out that reflection in experiential learning has some advantages in which he outlines several frameworks which aimed at “encouraging the student to look back on what has happened, critically framing the process, reflecting upon the choices made and how different actions could have led to improved outcomes.” Similar frameworks proposed by Schon (1987), Gibbs (1988) and Johns (1993) emphasized the importance and usefulness of reflection in experiential learning.

Another proponent of experiential learning is Rogers (1969; 1994). He proposed that learning should address the needs and wants of the learners. Rogers posits that experiential learning is similar to personal change and growth. All human beings possess natural tendency to learn and the role of the teacher is to facilitate and assist students in order to optimize their learning process. Thus, the teacher has to (1) provide a positive environment for learning; clarifying the purposes of the learners; (3) organize and make available learning resources; (4) balance the intellectual and emotional components of learning; and (5) share feelings and thoughts with the learners without dominating them (Instructional Design, 2013). Further, the underlying principles of this theory are as follows: (1) Substantial learning only occurs when the content learned is pertinent to students' interest (2) Learning, which is usually an intimidating endeavour, can be internalised more easily by minimising outside threats (3) Learning progresses more rapidly if there is minimum threat to the self, and (4) Learning as a result of one's own volition produces persistent knowledge and is retained longer (Instructional Design, 2013).

Learner-centred Approach

Educational Initiative Centre (2004) emphasized that in a learner-centred approach, learning is considered as a dynamic process and it promotes effective learning to take place where the focus is more on the learners. It requires three things to materialize: (1) the teacher; (2) the learner; (3) the environment. For the teacher, he/she acts as a facilitator whose role is to assist students in their understanding and handling of information. This will usually translate into a reduced amount of work in class (as students are collaborating with each other to negotiate or resolve the tasks they were given) but more work outside class for lesson planning and preparation and for assessment of students' work. For the students or learners, they take the responsibility for learning and become active knowledge seekers while they also construct knowledge by engaging with both the teacher and the data, which are collected through various mediums, with the goal of successfully resolving the problems/tasks given to them.

Having these theories and approach as a basis, the WEP was implemented as part of the teaching methodology for a business communication class in a higher institution of learning in Malaysia.

3.0 WORKPLACE EXPOSURE PROJECT (WEP)

Project Requirement

The project required the students to have an industrial site visit (s) and conduct a semi-structured interview as well as observation. Students were required to find out about business communication practices employed by the chosen company and to write their reflections before, during and after the WEP. Prior to the WEP, they had to obtain permission from relevant parties in order to gain entry into the organisation. This involved obtaining written permission from their own faculty to carry out the project and then, choosing the company of their own interest. Once they had identified the company, they had to obtain permission either verbally or in written form, or both. Before going out, they were briefed on what information to look for and what situations to observe. Finally, the students had to present their findings to the class orally and submit a written portfolio.

The Students

The students majored in Accounting and most of them had the ambition to become Accountants when they graduated from the university. There were 36 of them. Almost half of them possessed Diploma in Accounting and had gone through Industrial Training. Another half still had not had the opportunity for Industrial Training yet as they came into the university using STPM or Matriculation certificates. Nonetheless, all of them had a stint of working experience doing part-time jobs during semester holidays. Their English language level was from intermediate to excellent according to Malaysian English University Test (MUET) score, that is ranging from Band 3 – 6.

Host's Evaluation Form

After the interview, the Host or the Interviewee will have to fill in a form consisting 2 parts: Part A and part B. Part A requested the Host to confirm the student had request/confirmation letter, resume, and stated the number of hours the student spent at his/her workplace. Part B required the Host to evaluate the (1) student's English communication skills and the (2) student's conduct in the workplace; (3) give suggestions as to what the student should do to prepare for a post in his/her company; (4) Give an estimation of the student's English proficiency skills in terms of percentage (based upon 100%) on the two skills, namely speaking and writing; and (5) give details of the Host such as name, job title/position, phone/e-mail, company/employer, address, signature and stamp.

Students' Reflections about WEP and Business Communication Practices Employed by the Company

Before WEP

In this stage, students reflected their experience in getting access to the firm that they were interested in. Some used their personal contact and some just wrote or walked-in for an appointment. This required creativity and initiative from each individual student himself/herself and trained the student to be courageous and independent. For instance, a student reflected:

“I chose this firm because I had been working at the firm in 2009 as a trainee. In other words, I have some knowledge and information about the organization. So, I believe that the Accountant or any others from the firm would be assisting me for the interview session.

First, I had sent a text message to Senior Manager, Mr. Jay in order to ask permission for the interview session. Secondly, I sent an email to them and made a call to fix for an appointment. I got a chance to directly speak to the Accountant and fix an appointment for the interview session. There were no difficulties in the process.”

Students were requested to furnish valid evidence of an email or letter in getting the appointment.

During WEP

In general, all students managed to get an appointment for the interview. They enjoyed themselves in carrying out the interview, though some had the feeling of nervousness inside themselves. This is reflected as follows:

“I enjoyed the day because everyone treated me nicely and politely. The Accountant of the firm spent his time for the interview session. We had spent almost 1 hour for the interview session and he explained issues of Accounting for another half an hour which was more interesting. I have learned extra knowledge on those Accounting issues and some notes were provided for me. Before that, there was a surprise when the Accountant opened the door when I reached there at 10 o'clock. I did not wait for so long and I started the interview session immediately after I reached the office.”

Through this reflection, it could be found that students had better understanding in the concept of business communication through their own lenses. The following excerpt indicates this:

“Moreover, I learned that business communication practices must exist to communicate with each other in an organization. There are many types of communication medium that are used in an organization. Business communication helps an organization to convey information and messages within or outside organization. There was a standard language used in an organization to share information for business purposes.”

“Actually, I felt nervous when speaking with the Accountant although I knew him before. The more time spent with him increased my level of confidence in conducting interview with the Accountant. The Accountant gave detailed and clear explanation towards the questions. Even the staff in that firm helped me to photocopy some documents related to Accounting issues and to take pictures.”

They also found the relevance of English at the workplace which will be discussed later.

After WEP

The WEP had given some different experience and learning process to the students. The most important thing that they had found is that studying business communication is important for them as depicted in the following excerpt: *“... business communication is very important in external environment especially in the business world. Each individual must learn business communication in order to enter the job market. This is because business communication is a connection between organizations whether inside or outside a country.”*

Students also found that English was important in the workplace environment. They were aware that English is an international and formal language. One of the reflections states this: *“... Most organizations or companies used English whenever they dealt with a business with another company. The written media of business communication, such as report, memo, emails, and even phone calls conversation were also conducted in English. Business people believe that proficiency in English language may help to make their business stronger because they are able to attract many types of investors.”*

Apart from that, they also had to be conversant in spoken English as the language was being used for interviews and other forms of oral communication

Business Communication Practices Identified

The students were able to see the types of business communication practices used in the company through this project. Table 1 shows the types found through the project. They were reports, memos, letters, emails and social media. Except for memos, they were used for internal and external communication. The detailed types for each communication practice varied according to the company. Similarly, social media has played significant roles in today’s business where most companies are using Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube for their organizational purposes.

This is reflected in their writing:

“Company M uses social media to interact and communicate with their customers and subscribers. They have social media like Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and they have M Official website. Mr. A. said that this social media network is used since it is very efficient and effective way to communicate with M customers and subscribers. Besides that, it is an easier medium to promote M to the youth and working group. He said that, information that can be found in the company social media network account is the company’s products, promotions, launcher of new product and any services disruption to plan maintenance. All this information is very important to inform the customers and subscribers about the plan. The advantages of using this social media to the company are that it is an efficient and effective way for M to communicate with subscribers. The subscribers can easily connect with the company if they have problem regarding their plan or products subscribed under M Company. However, this social media can lead to disadvantages also to the company as it can easily spread any rumours or unethical behavior.”

Here, indirectly the students also learned about ethics in communicating when using social media by having live examples presented in front of them.

Table 1 Business communication practices identified

Report	Letter	Memo
Reports	Internal	External
Memos	Internal	-
Letters	Internal	External
Emails	Internal	External
Social media	Internal	External

The Role of English

English is the medium of communication for this subject. Therefore, students had to communicate to the interviewee in English as they were rated by the interviewee regarding their English language performance. Generally, students agreed that English is the main medium of communication at the workplace in Malaysia. For example, this is depicted in the following excerpts:

“...MG&Co. is using fully English in their daily conversation when dealing with clients and for overall business communication. Unless if the clients are unable to speak or understand English.”

“Based on my observation that day, I can see that this office uses English most of the time. From information, small discussions, report to meeting, English is used as the main medium to communicate. Mr. A said that, they only use other languages when they are discussing among the staff about other things

that are not related to work. Mostly, when they are discussing work or communicating via email, he said that they use English as the main medium of communication. He stated that the use of other languages is very minimal. Therefore, I can conclude that this office mainly uses English in their workplace.”

Some students had the opportunity to get involved in a multi-national company which has a branch company in Malaysia or had counterparts from other countries, such as India, Singapore, Azer Baijan, USA and many others. This type of company has more dependency on English language more than the others.

Nonetheless, for some companies, the middle and upper level or top management would be using English most of the time whereas the middle lower and below would use Malay and other languages, such as Mandarin, Tamil and others. For written communication, mainly it is in English. The following tables summarize this:

Table 2 English Language Usage at Managerial Level

Language	Management Level
English (spoken)	Top /Upper
English (spoken)	Middle Upper
English (spoken) Malay (spoken) Mandarin/Chinese dialects/Tamil	Middle Lower
English (spoken) Malay (spoken) Mandarin/Chinese dialects/Tamil	Lower

Table 3 English Language Usage and Functions in Malaysian Based Companies

Language	Management Level	Functions
English (written)	Top /Upper	Malay (Government/official purposes/customers)
English (written)	Middle Upper	
English (written)	Middle Lower	English (for foreign countries /suppliers/customers)
Malay (written)		Mandarin/Other Languages (for customers)
Mandarin/Chinese dialects/Tamil		
Malay (written)	Lower	
Mandarin/Chinese dialects/Tamil		

In order to produce a proper letter, students who were not proficient in English had to study more before typing the letter to be sent to the company. Next, when they realized that their pronunciation and grammar were out of place, they had to practice more before going for the interview. This had transformed them to become a better learner who is responsible for their own learning.

In doing WEP, students had the opportunity to practice what they had learnt in class. In this aspect, written business communication played a significant role as written by a student: (Reflections on what happened before WEP):

“One of the requirements for this subject is to interview a company in order to know their business communication activities and practices. ...I am also curious about the amount of English used in this company.”

“Before I officially contacted the manager via e-mail, I tried to ask the manager personally whether I could do some short interview with him about business communication activities and practices by the company. After this informal request, I sent a formal e-mail and letter explaining further about this matter. The manager accepted my request to interview by replying to my email. During the process, there were no difficulties that I faced since the manager gave me his best to help regarding the interview. The manager was willing to answer all my interview questions during the interview session as he knew that it was needed to help with my assignment requirement.”

“From this process, I managed to learn how to initiate a communication with external individual using e-mail with a formal format. Besides that, I learned how to write a formal letter and find a company that is willing to let me interview them about their business communication activities and practices. I also learn the

importance of business communication in this process as we have to communicate with others in a proper channel and how to make sure the channel we used are correct so that what we want to send is received by the other party. I learned that email to be sent to company needs to be written in a proper manner and in details so that the receiver understands the contents of the email. Besides that, I also learn that style of writing affects our personality. If we write email to others with a very bad style of writing or not in a good manner, it leaves a bad impression of ourselves to others especially to someone that we do not know.”

4.0 DISCUSSIONS

Chan (2012) points out that experiential learning complements traditional approach based teaching and that using experiential learning, students are able to transform their understanding fully from textbooks that they have studied in the classroom.

As can be seen from the above process, this project involves not only the teacher but also the learner and the industry. This project has succeeded in stimulating interest among the students to undertake the responsibility of learning on their own and be active knowledge seekers. Nonetheless, the role of the teacher as a facilitator should not be neglected. When students encountered difficulties regarding the project, it is the duty of the teacher to guide the students to choose the right strategy. For instance, when they could not get access to a company, the teacher may suggest another company which would be more approachable.

Phang (2006) claims that English is being employed in the entire industries in Malaysia mainly in private and multinational companies. Hafizoah Kassim and Fatimah Ali (2010) also support this through their findings, English is the language of choice for workplace communication regardless the type of industry one belongs to. Another crucial point for Malaysian learners is that the students had discovered through first hand experience on the importance of English as a medium of communication in industries or at the workplace. This had a stronger impact on them if compared to just being informed by the teacher on the importance of English at the workplace. The WEP also had provided an avenue for them to use English at the real workplace while having the interview with the companies. Experiential learning in this context had been an eye-opener for them that in order to remain competitive as future graduates, they have to equip themselves with proficiency in the English language together with the knowledge of their core areas.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The WEP had provided a platform for business communication students to expose themselves to real industrial experience. This exposure will help them in the future when they start their working life and this experience could not be obtained from textbook or classroom. They had to be at the site to feel it. Secondly, English plays a major role in business communication in Malaysia, in written and

spoken form. Without the knowledge of English, it is almost impossible for a graduate to survive in the working environment especially at higher level management.

Teaching Implications

Participation from the industry is required in order to make sure the project is a success. In this case, the students were fortunate because they had been given access to the organizations as part of the learning experience. There were instances also where companies rejected their application after an interview. In cases like these, the only choice for the students was to keep looking until they found one company for their study.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is recommended that future research might venture into more areas rather than business communication practices. Quantitative approach could also be implemented so that the findings could be generalized.

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