

Hearing Voices of Local Graduates in a Malaysian Workplace on Their English Language Competency

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ABSTRACT

The call from the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia to academics in tertiary institutions to collaborate with industry is pertinent where curriculum design is concerned. Far too often what we teach in the university does not match with real world needs. Hence this small scale study is one which aims to bridge that gap. Using a quasi-ethnographic approach, the researcher who was based at a manufacturing firm in Klang Valley, observed the company activities and carried out semi structured interviews with employees who have graduated from local universities. The aim of the study is to find out whether they have a need to improve their English language skills, and if so, in what areas would they want to be trained. In hearing their “voices”, various perspectives were obtained regarding their competence at the workplace. The findings revealed that work competency does not rely on language skills alone, but other factors come into play and these need to be given attention as well.

Keywords: Effective communication, communicative competence, Small Medium-sized Enterprise (SME), English for Specific Purposes

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Effective communication at the workplace is often seen as one of the main factors in contributing to a dynamic, stable and successful business enterprise. Having a workforce who is both communicatively and technically competent is a great asset. However of late, much attention has been given to the lack of communicative competence of young graduates in Malaysian workplaces. The main complaint is that local graduates are not able to speak, read or write well at work. And to make things worse, they are often compared to their contemporaries who have graduated from foreign universities. It is hence timely that the higher authorities have asked all local universities’ administration and academic staff to look into this matter seriously and arrest the problem of incompetence, particularly in the use of English language, among locally trained graduates. This is made more urgent as we are just a little more than a decade from realizing the 2020 Vision put forward by the former prime minister who projected that in the 21st century, Malaysia’s ability to compete globally must include its people who

“is our ultimate resource. In the 1990s and beyond, Malaysia must give the fullest emphasis possible to the development of this resource.”

(Dr. Mahatir, Vision 2020)

As such part of the human resource development includes upgrading and enhancing the English language competence of its workforce. The role of English in workplace is indeed a crucial one as the nation seeks to be part of the global economy and if it is to cope with the rapid development of technologies of the 21st century. In fact today's organization of work is being referred to as the "new work order" (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996), where in a largely service oriented economy, the "human factor" is often considered a key element in the construction of efficient and competitive managerial strategies. This newly emerged work order has clearly contributed to redefine which abilities are expected from the part of the workers. Filliettaz (2001) and others who have conducted research in workplace communication has conceded that the emergence of a new work order is associated with the growing importance of language use in the workplace. Gunnarsson (1997:1) emphasizes this point by saying that "language has become one of the most important tools of many new professions where oral and written contact with the general public forms the core of professional work". To add, the former prime minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, at the launch of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007-2010, said that the action plan "stresses the importance of human capital development. This will give us the necessary competitive edge in today's globalized world." (The Star, 22 August 2007).

This paper seeks to describe the use of English by a group of locally trained graduates employed in the manufacturing industry. It summarizes the language needs of these employees and their perceptions of the role of English at their workplace. The paper also presents some examples of real language used by these subjects with other members of the workforce in and during business and production meetings.

2.0 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Roe (1993), in a well-received paper on the "Anatomy of ESP", lucidly expressed the need for research in ESP to be contextualized. He states:

"We take the guess work out of ESP by finding out, by carefully observing the language of the target discourse community, by describing it and by working out just what the learner needs to know in order to be able to access information it contains, or master the production of that part of the community's linguistic resource which they need in order to play their part in it – two very different things, requiring very different treatment." (Roe, 1993:11)

The discourse community in this study is the members of the workforce belonging to a small-medium sized enterprise (SME) which manufactures food items. The company's specialization is in specific food items and hence the number of items manufactured is limited. However due to their established business ties, they have a stable clientele and serves their clients who are multi corporations with stores locally and internationally. This establishment has two factories located in Klang Valley, and although it has two production sites, one in Subang Jaya, and the other in Port Klang, it is run by a General Manager, who is assisted by a number of senior managers, executives and supervisors. It has about 200 employees, 120 of whom are factory operators, while the others are either in managing, supervisory or administrative positions, seeing to the smooth running of the manufacturing plant and managing the whole enterprise.

The language most commonly used is English, and the communicative event of meetings is taken for language analysis. However, a sub study was carried out to focus on a group of employees who are local graduates as the focus of this paper is on their language needs (i.e. English for specific purposes) and competency. What differentiates ESP from general English is the awareness of the need. The

company is a Malaysian SME which has international links and hence English is the main language used on a daily basis and for all official matters. However with employees who come from multilingual backgrounds, many other languages are also used on a daily basis at the workplace. The languages are Bahasa Malaysia, Tamil, Mandarin and Chinese dialects like Cantonese and Hokkien. The term ‘needs’ is rather general and open to various interpretations. Brindley (1984) categorized ‘needs’ into two: objective and subjective needs. While the former is based on the language learners’ personal profile, proficiency level and language patterns, the latter deals more with the learners’ wants, desires or expectations. While objective needs can be measured, subjective ones are more difficult to quantify, hence an approach to look at such needs would be qualitative. This study is a preliminary finding on the subjective needs of the current employees of the establishment under study.

3.0 METHOD

Interviews were conducted with eleven graduates employed by the firm at the company’s premise. They were selected on the criteria that they had obtained their first degree from one of the local universities. A list of the questions asked during the interview can be found in Appendix A. In order to engage their participation at the interview, permission was sought and granted from the General Manager. The researcher adopted an ethnographic approach to this study base on the premise that it allows her to be part of the organizational culture, and easy access to “inside” knowledge where by being “forced to come to understand a culture” (Spradley, 1979), she is able to draw more accurate conclusions of the context. From a sociolinguistic perspective, if language research involves naturalistic speech, then it is best to locate it in a context. Gumperz (1970:9) argues that it is better to employ ethnography knowledge in such a case so that it is easier to “evaluate its social significance” particularly the “social norms governing linguistic choice in the situation recorded.” Thus, with permission granted from the company’s gatekeeper (the General Manager), and a proposal submitted for approval, the researcher was given full access to the company’s sites. She was present as a non-participant observer and was allowed to record all work-related meetings for a 3-month period. During that time, the researcher was also permitted to interview any of the staff as long as they were able to make time for her.

Information regarding the eleven graduates interviewed is provided in the table below. Of the 11, there are seven Malays, two Indians, one Chinese and the other is a Sino-Kadazan. Most of them were trained in the food processing discipline, with only one in accountancy as she was employed in the finance department. They hold administrative, supervisory and executive positions and are directly involved with production, quality assurance and engineering, except for ID in finance. Most of them are rather new at the company except for two who have been with the company for 6 years.

Participants	University	Degree	No of years working in BB
NA (m)	UPM	B.A. Science & Food Technology	1
NR (m)	UPM	B.Engineering Process & Food Engineering	2
ST (i)	UPM	B.Sc Food Science & Technology	½
MG (i)	UMS	B.Sc Food Processing & Bio Processing	2
SH (m)	UPM	B.Engineering Process & Food Engineering	1
RW (m)	UiTM	Dip Engineering	2
PL (c)	UPM	B.Sc Food Studies	2
ID (m)	UUM	B. Accountancy	¼
MS (m)	UPM	B.Sc Food Studies	6
DI (o)	UiTM	B.Sc Food Quality Management	2
JU (m)	UPM	B.Sc Food Science & Technology	6

- m – malay
- i – indian
- c – Chinese
- o – others

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interview revealed several interesting needs and perceptions from the local graduates. Most of them said that English is the main language used at the company and placed it on a scale of 5 (very useful) except for ID, who being in finance, was not required to meet customers or report to the top managers. Those involved with customer service and quality assurance departments (NA, NR, ST, MG, SH, PL, MS, DI and JU) commented that they use English with their customers and suppliers usually via the spoken mode (telephone conversations and face to face interaction) and written medium (letters and emails). Even those involved with production (NR, RW and MS) i.e. the executives and supervisors use English as they deal with their production operators who are foreign workers (Nepalese, Bangladeshis and Indians). However according to RW, it would be in “broken English.” On a daily basis, six of the 11 said they use English on a scale of 3. The Malay language is also used quite frequently, especially among production executives, some of whom are not graduates and have worked in the company for more than 5 years. MS who is a production executive chairs weekly meetings and uses more Malay than English with her team mates because 5 out of seven are Malays, and among them, two are very senior staff who are non graduates and have served in the company for more than 10 years, having gone up to senior positions through rank and file. But MS switch to English when she converses with top level management staff who comprise of managers in various departments such as the human resource and purchasing.

The interview results also shows that their language needs are varied and those who said they would want more “speaking” courses is referring to communication courses such as presentation skills and also confidence in speaking especially to their customers and suppliers. One interesting point to note is that all eleven felt they lack confidence in speaking, especially in front of an audience, and that includes speaking at meetings with the more senior managers. It seems that their problem is not their lack of competency in the English language, rather that they are shy and nervous. This confirms with findings from studies done with second language learners at universities where shyness is often cited as one of the main reasons for not wanting to speak in English.

An example of this can be seen in the extracts given below. In the case of NR, her command of the language is clearly above average, and a check on her MUET band reveals that she is in Band 4, meaning she is a “competent speaker who is able to keep communication going though with occasional unevenness with light stumbling and groping for words” (MUET band descriptor). Her comments about the first aid kit in extract 1 shows her competency and when she code switches at one point as seen below:

(extract 1)

- NR: *ah regarding the first aid kit ah ah okay for production office I am the one appointed to bring the first aid during any emergency or fire drill okay but in case I am not around I think this one siapa ada dalam production office patut tau dia atau*
- L: *get an assistant appoint an assistant*

NR: *ah ya lah kena orang ada orang yang back up lah ambil sebab I won't be in the office all the time mungkin bila ada emergency ke apa I mungkin somewhere else*

Code switching here is not due to the lack of proficiency in the language, rather to show her solidarity with the other members present at the meeting which was attended by ten others and this short snippet is part of a 52-min meeting where the Production Manager chaired on matters regarding OSH (Occupational Safety Hazards). In fact code switching is a skill which requires pragmatic as well as grammatical competence of a bilingual speaker and is used to achieve certain communicative goals. In the context of the above extract, NR (a Malay) is in a meeting with the others, where there were 2 Chinese, 2 Indians and the rest were Malays. To show that she is part of the Malay community and show her sense of solidarity with them, the switch to Malay is justified. But if the whole extract is examined again, it is evident that her English language structures were accurate and the responses she gives to L when asked questions were also appropriate. In the interview with NR, she commented that she is quite fluent in English as she uses it at university and although she can carry out a conversation quite confidently in English at work, she reverts to Malay with her Malay colleagues so as not to appear arrogant. Holmes (2000:35) explained that one of the reasons for code switching is to express solidarity among participants of the conversation and to identify with each other's cultural background. It is also often used to signal membership and shared ethnicity.

Another example is of a speaker who has a moderate level of English proficiency is evident in DI, who holds a conversation with the general manager confidently as seen in extract 2 below.

(extract 2)

DI : *we only received the shoe and the t-shirt last week last two week*
 MS : *on May*
 DI : *on May right ah last week and the pants we only receive today*
 GM : *didn't you tell this earlier to B because January to now is almost May already*
 DI : *actually bring up to B already but he said that this one is L so we have to push up on L*

Because speech is transient and no time is taken to plan or plot it out, accuracy of the language is not considered as crucial as fluency. However it is clear that DI's response to the general manager's questions were appropriate and pragmatically competent. When the General Manager questioned whether the delay in supplying uniform to the workers had been taken up to the Production Manager (B) or Human Resource Manager (L), DI could have responded by saying "yes", but as can be seen from the analysis of the extract above, her response provided enough information to the GM that it not only had already been raised with the respective personnel but also that B and L seems to be pushing the job around and hence nothing is accomplished. The speech act of complaint here is indirect. DI's communicative intent is to show the GM that she has done her part and the people higher up had delayed the whole matter.

Even SH whose level of English is not as proficient as NR or DI, shows her ability to use the language when she gives the correct responses to the GM's queries. If her structures were to be accurate, only the preposition and article "of the" is left out of the phrase "at the entrance door" (extract 3.1) and the utterance "when it is heavy raining" is inverted and has to be corrected to "raining heavily".

(extract 3.1)

GM: oh okay which part again ah

MS: er P72 eh

Sh: at the entrance door and in front (inaudible)

And further down the conversation

(extract 3.2)

GM: yeah you have to tell them don't issue until they repair this is the most effective way I tell you don't care what they say they don't give me they don't repair we will hold on their cheque until they do it every time they want their money they will do it they are suppose to take care of our er you know all this err repair and maintenance on the roof but do you think we can wait raining when it come what will happen the buns will get wet

SH: when it is heavy raining

There are more of such examples but within the scope of this paper, these examples should suffice. For a more complete transcript of the above extracts, please refer to Appendix B.

Writing needs is inevitably in high demand, especially the need to write reports and letters, though email was not mentioned. This is apparent as the company deals with production which needs to churn out products every day and numbers are important. They too have ISO audit, and quality control matters that need constant monitoring and they cannot avoid paper work. Reports are often produced when there are issues pertaining to machinery breakdown, or faulty products. However the reports are usually short and concise, with a ready-to-use template. Hence, when asked if what they have learnt at university is relevant to this workplace needs, some were of the opinion that it was not. One of the reasons cited was that they were doing English as electives as they were exempted from the foundation courses, and electives like Report Writing were more an academic exercise, whereas in the real world, the report format is different and when a report template is used, and only key points are filled into the forms.

When the researcher made a comment that the media has been reporting that local graduates are not as competent as the foreign graduates, two of those interviewed vehemently denied and voiced their opinion strongly. One said that although they may not have accurate and fluent language ability, they can do their job efficiently, and this can be verified by the company's appraisal. From here, it can be seen that the locally trained graduate employees are able to voice out their opinion confidently and are slighted by such negative remarks made either by the media or the higher authorities. Interestingly, a reader of the Star newspaper wrote in response to this remark by saying that "we local graduates may not be better but we are in no way inferior to overseas professional graduates" (The STAR, 30 May 2007). Perhaps as Roe (1993) puts it, the use of language must be studied in context and such sweeping statement made by the media must also be taken with caution as each workplace context is different. In a manufacturing firm where time is crucial to profits and loss, is language ability alone pertinent for productivity? The interview revealed that equally important are the attitudes and skills of the workers, and by looking in detail at their language use at the workplace, reveals that there is more to work efficiency than language alone.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The gap between what we teach at universities and what the workforce needs in the real world is a big one. The call from the Ministry of Higher Education to academics in tertiary institutions to collaborate with industry is certainly a move towards the right direction. Not only can this step help bridge the widened gap of academia and industry, it can also help equip present members of the Malaysian workforce with the appropriate language skills much needed in their daily tasks at work as they contribute towards the economic progress and development of this country in attaining the Vision 2020 goals. Roe's suggestion of a language audit should also be taken up as a measure into language research at workplaces. According to him

“An obvious responsibility for the leading members of the ESP community in Malaysia, or indeed any country, is surely to ensure that the nation’s development towards its self-appointed goals is not jeopardized by either too much or too little English, by the wrong kind of English, by inefficient language services, by failure to provide (all and only) the necessary language skills. The kind of people in this responsible work I refer to as “language auditors” and “language engineers”. (Roe, 1993:12)

More in depth research in specific contexts could be conducted and needs analysis be made according to different occupations and their respective discourse communities.

Effective communication in English is critical in business organizations, particularly if the business wants to have that extra edge over its competitors in the new work order. A workforce that can speak and write well would definitely be an asset and much attention has been given to this aspect. However, good communication skills alone cannot bring a business establishment to the forefront. Other skills are equally important, and to focus only on language competence may be a handicap.

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APPENDIX A**INTERVIEW (10-15 mins)**

General purpose of interview:

to investigate the use of language at the company by local graduates (UPM, UKM, UTM, UM or UiTM)

SECTION A

1. State your name and your qualification and the university you studied at.
2. Is this yr first job? What is yr position at this workplace? How many years have you worked with HFM?
3. What do you consider is the main language used at this company?
4. Who do you use English with? And for what reasons?
5. Who do you use B.M. with? And for what reasons?
6. Do you agree that the use of English is important in this company on a daily basis? On a scale of 1 – 5, 1 for not useful at all, 5 very useful
7. How much English do you use daily? On a scale 1 – 5, 1 for little , 5 - a lot

SECTION B:

1. If given training, would like to have English classes and in what area of English would like to have them
2. Do you feel that what you have learnt in University, especially English courses (the types) was able to prepare you for the workplace
3. Do you agree with what has been reported in the press about the quality of our local graduates? (Due to their poor communication skills, local graduates are not as competent as foreign graduates)?

APPENDIX B**Extract 1: First Aid Kit**

At this meeting, NR is conversing with L (Human Resource Manager) and MK (Asst Production Manager)

- NR: ah regarding the first aid kit ah ah okay for production office I am the one appointed to bring the first aid during any emergency or fire drill okay but in case I am not around I think this one siapa ada dalam production office patut tau dia atau
 L: get an assistant appoint an assistant
 NR: ah ya lah kena orang ada orang yang back up lah ambil sebab I won't be in the office all the time mungkin bila ada emergency ke apa I mungkin somewhere else
 L: so
 NR: and then untuk first aid kit yang ada kalau ada JU boleh bawa turun not enough let's say ada injured ke first aid kit maybe not enough
 L: not sufficient lah so who do like er you recommend for your assistant
 NR: for production ah because semua orang pun bukan dalam office punya person
 L: can we get MK
 MK: er okay I I can take the responsibility to what another thing is er maybe we can put somewhere that is

Extract 2: Staff Uniform

At this meeting, DI is discussing the above matter with the GM (General Manager) who is chairing the meeting with MS (the Production Executive)

- GM : it means the the January one until June they don't give ah why is this so aiyoh
 DI : we only received the shoe and the t-shirt last week last two week
 MS : on May
 DI : on May right ah last week and the pants we only receive today
 GM : didn't you tell this earlier to B because January to now is almost May already
 DI : actually bring up to B already but he said that this one is L so we have to push up on L
 GM : no B should push L you see never mind I will I will check with her both of them ah I push to you you push to me ah push until next year also ah nothing happen ah no this one is important you should er if not then send an email out cc to myself lah because I only er today B only mention in a meeting over there staff haven't got their uniform
 DI : decision is to fax xxx but I keep on asking L so
 GM : so shoe and t-shirt you got it last week already
 DI : ah last two weeks, on May
 GM : so, what are the thing pending
 MS/DI : pants we are receiving today
 GM : pants today and xxx
 DI : that one is only for staff
 GM : for staff
 MS : supervisor not yet
 GM : supervisor not yet
 DI : yeah
 GM : any commitment from her

DI	: er I don't know
GM	: okay I'll check with L
DI	: because what we understand last time
GM	: never mind. I'll check with her shouldn't drag so long ah, it's very bad you see

Extract 3: Leaking roof

At this meeting, MS and SH is discussing with the GM on the above matter.

MS:	er still have a leaking of roofing
GM:	leaking of
MS:	roofing
GM:	oh still haven't done or
MS:	done already
GM:	or it was previous or the new matter again
MS:	yes
GM:	oh okay which part again ah
MS:	er P72 eh
Sh:	at the entrance door and in front xxx
GM:	er have you all inform inform them
Z:	yes we have inform and they say they will come
GM:	when did they say they will come
Z:	check er get back to me xxx we haven't confirm and I'll get back to them
GM:	have you told finance department about that
Z:	not yet er just a few xxx
GM:	yeah you have to tell them don't issue until they repair this is the most effective way I tell you don't care what they say they don't give me they don't repair we will hold on their cheque until they do it every time they want their money they will do it they are suppose to take care of our er you know all this err repair and maintenance on the roof but do you think we can wait raining when it come what will happen the buns will get wet
SH:	when it is heavy raining
GM:	it is very critical right the er it will drop onto
MS:	er on the floor but there is a traffic where the bun moving from that are so it might xxx the product