ENGLISH FOR WORKPLACE: WHAT DO WE NEED TO TEACH?

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Abstract- Malaysian employers have considerable reservations when it comes to graduates' employability skills, particularly their flawed English language competence. Given the challenges faced by higher education institutions in Malaysia to match employers' requirements, there is a need to initiate holistic and comprehensive research on the curriculum practices of current English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses. This study pursues to better comprehend employers' perspectives, expectations and practices in dealing with the English language demands of the workplace environment. This paper will define Professional Communication Skills (PCS) by looking at the needs and requirements of Malaysian stakeholders, namely employers, the government and academia. This component explores the requirements, suggestions as well as common practices in relation to English language communication carried out at the workplace in the public and private sectors in Malaysia as voiced by the stakeholders. This qualitative study sits within the interpretivist paradigm, where data were primarily drawn from in-depth interviews with 24 respondents. This study has yielded findings that make an original contribution to both the theory and practice of English language literacies. The outcomes are especially beneficial for informing policy makers' agendas in producing competent graduates for the future local and global workforce.

I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysian employers have expressed their dissatisfaction with the general level of preparedness of graduates who are prospective employees. A considerable amount of research has shown that there is a gap between employers' requirements of entry-level employees and their actual skills (Malaysian Employers Federation, 2009; Krishnamoorthy, 2007; Ramli, 2006; Isarji et al., 2008 and 2013). Employers' dissatisfaction with graduates is not primarily due to inadequate technical knowledge or skills. Rather, employers have considerable reservations when it comes to graduates' nontechnical abilities or employability skills, particularly their English language proficiency (Ambigapathy & Aniswal, 2005; Malaysian Employers Federation, 2007; Stapa et al., 2008; Isarji et al., 2008; Isarji & Ainol Madziah, 2008; Sirat et al., 2008). It has been stressed by employers that graduates are not only accepted as employees for knowledge and specific technical competencies, but also for a certain level of communication, social, emotional and critical thinking skills to enable workers, for example, to work in teams, to motivate themselves when confronting challenges, to solve interpersonal disputes, and to tolerate high levels of stress (Ainol Madziah et. al., 2011).

Malaysia's economy has been growing at an annual rate of 6.6% for the past three decades; yet unemployment rates have increased from 2.6% in 1996 to 3.6% in 2010 (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2011). The numbers show that young graduates, in particular, experience difficulties in securing their first jobs and many graduates hold jobs that do not correspond to their education and expectations. Of critical importance to the massive expansion of higher education to these HE institutions are the challenges in terms of the need to plan and support the further expansion of the system and its quality and relevance Ainol Madziah et. al., 2011).

The purpose of this research is to develop a Professional Communication Skills (labelled PCS from here onwards) in English Framework to help in supporting English lecturers and instructors teaching EOP courses in Malaysian higher education institutions. The PCS framework will consist of the communication constructs in English related to PCS skills essential for Malaysian graduates for instance, verbal and non-verbal communication, interpersonal communication and cultural competence. These PCS skills will include the needs of employers from the public and private sectors. Therefore, the voices of Malaysian stakeholders, namely the government, multi-national companies and academia, will be explored, analysed and summarised in this PCS Framework. In doing so, a qualitative approach to inquiry, couched within the interpretive paradigm for data collection and analysis, will be used to facilitate an in-depth and detailed understanding of Malaysian stakeholders' needs in relation to PCS in English.

English Literacy in Employability: Malaysian Context

In Malaysia, the quality of education in the country has been questioned, in view of the fact that a sizeable number of local graduates remain unemployed (Sirat, et al., 2008). In addition, the changing demands of higher education as a consequence of globalisation have prompted considerable research with unemployment issues as its central focus (Ministry of Higher Education, 2006; Wok et al., 2007). Many requests and views have been put forward suggesting the need to bridge the gap or mismatch between the available supply of manpower and the expectations of potential employers (Habib, 2007; Yunus, 2007). That English language determines employability has often been

confirmed and discussed in these studies. In their studies Sirat et al. (2008) and Hyland & Hamp-Lyons (2002) stress that ensuring graduates can function in English in the workplace is a major issue in Malaysia and many developing countries. They state that graduates have poor mastery of English, especially in the area of communication. This is a major factor contributing to unemployment of graduates in addition to low academic achievement and the lack of technical knowledge. Graduates from Malaysian universities have been perceived as lacking in communication skills and proficiency in English language in most studies.

One prominent study on unemployment problems among graduates from Malaysian HEIs was conducted by Sirat et al. in 2008. Using the survey instrument and focus group interview techniques, they identified the reasons why Malaysian graduates are not successful in getting employed. An important finding of this study suggests that the approach in the teaching programme needs to integrate communication and English literacy skills of the 21st century. They agree that a framework or module on communication skills in English must be designed to assist and train lecturers to design the syllabus and teaching methods (Sirat et al., 2008). The framework designed must be accompanied by a series of training modules to help lecturers in integrating content and workplace English literacy in their teaching and assessment of the students.

This study seeks to find answers to the issues by examining the problem itself and by having the problem-solvers or key informants share their insights and experiences, utilising a qualitative method of study. Thus, building on the theories and conclusions informed by previous research, this study turns towards developing an essential yet absent framework of PCS in ESL for Malaysian HEIs. Research in workplace literacies has concentrated less on examining students' English language literacy practices and competencies for workplace life; rather it has gone a long way in unpacking the more generic lists of competencies for the students to achieve. Hence, this theme needs to be addressed more centrally by critically looking at other elements of workplace literacy practices, which include reading, listening and speaking, specifically in the English language. Despite the lack of competence demonstrated by graduates in these skills, they are unfortunately not universally articulated as learning goals in current higher education curricula. Therefore, this study will help fill the gap in the literature by providing qualitative insights into stakeholders' practices and their requirements with regard to communicating in English at the workplace, especially at entry-level.

Method

Qualitative research is best suited for this study of the phenomenon of English language workplace literacy practices and PCS of graduates about which little information is provided in the literature (Creswell, 2008). To surmount this deficit, the need for a detailed understanding of the issue from the perspectives of the participants, particularly in the Malaysian context, warrants the use of qualitative inquiry due to its fundamentally interpretive nature This study sits within the interpretivist paradigm, where data were primarily drawn from in-depth interviews with 24 respondents in the following subgroups: 1) human resource managers from key multi-national industries (10 respondents); 2) government executives who recruit entry-level employees for public sector (4 respondents) and; 3) EOP instructors and HE liaison officers for industrial training (10 respondents). The data were subjected to rigorous deductive and iterative analysis in which ATLAS.ti software was applied. To assure the rigour, integrity and legitimacy of the research process and its worth, trustworthiness criteria were applied all the way through the study. In this study, the Communicative Competent Model by Morreale, Spitzberg and Barge (2007) was implemented in order to have a sufficient theoretical blueprint to guide the study design, data collection and analysis.

Findings

In an attempt to obtain comprehensive understanding on the stakeholders' point of view on future workforce, issues raised by the researched employers concerning the graduates' PCS produced by the local universities were presented and described. To encapsulate the stakeholders' requirements from the graduates, the Professional Communication Skills Framework in English is disclosed as appendix. Two core components that should be taught in HE classrooms are themed under cognitive knowledge and communication skills, as shown in tables below.

1 Cognitive Knowledge Desired by Stakeholders

Sub Component	Indicators	Requirement for workplace	Learning outcomes: 'Upon graduation, graduates should be able to…'
Content Knowledge	Specific jargon, Discourse competence	Contribute to on-going improvement and expansion of knowledge in the betterment of workplace operations.	• Build a relevant knowledge base for workplace. • Apply their subject content knowledge at workplace. • Manage own learning in order to maintain and renew attributes throughout working lives. • Use specific work-related jargon appropriately in speech and reports.
Cultural Competence	Cultural knowledge to speak appropriately depending on setting (formal/casual)	Contribute to harmonious relations between superior, subordinates, colleagues and clients.	• Speak and write using the most appropriate register. • Agreeing/Disagreeing with the superior and subordinate in a diplomatic manner. • Adapt with small talks with colleagues, being aware with context awareness.

Linguistic Competence	Vocabulary Grammar Fluency Pronunciation (clearly and accurately)	Contribute to meaningful and effective conversations using appropriate workplace discourse.	• Organise spoken and written language during a variety of communication tasks at workplace. • Present their speech and written work using appropriate vocabulary and fluency. • Clearly and accurately articulate words during workplace activities.
Critical thinking	Hypothesising Synthesising Criticism Scepticism	Contribute to constructive criticism while resolving issues at workplace.	• Critically synthesising their thoughts in a professional manner to improve situation. • Identify, analyse and solve problems critically and innovatively. • Give positive feedback and healthy criticism after analysing issues at workplace. •
Tasking skill	Defining problem Analysing the problem Identifying criteria for solving the problem Generating solutions or alternatives Evaluating solutions	Contribute to productive long-term and short-term strategic planning and effective execution of workplace tasks.	• Organise thoughts and solve workplace problems and issues. • Argue politely in generating solutions and alternatives in workplace issue. • Synthesise issues at work and evaluate solutions individually.

As Morreale et.al (2007) explain, knowledge in the context of communication constitutes the what and the how of communication; the content and procedural knowledge. Content knowledge is what we know about communication, how to form words while speaking or writing, how to gesture, use vocal control and employ physical proximity. It is an awareness of what behaviour is best suited for a given situation. In this research, graduates are expected not only to communicate in a professional manner at the workplace, but they must also have ample information about the subject matter (Włoszczak-Szubzda & Jarosz, 2012). Therefore, the use of specific jargon and having suitable discourse competence is also essential for workplace communication. Having ample subject content knowledge will help contribute to on-going improvement and expansion of knowledge for the betterment of workplace operations.

Additionally, Malaysian stakeholders spoke about communication skills as one of the keys to personal and career success. Communication Skill is having the ability to apply effective and appropriate behaviour in the given communication context and the actual performance of the behaviour. Communication skills, based on the needs of Malaysian stakeholders are grouped under five main sub components, namely, interpersonal communication, presentation skills, speaking, writing and listening skills, as well as non-verbal communication. The learning outcomes stated in the fourth column were voiced by the respondents on specific criteria that graduates should achieve prior to graduation. The findings demonstrated in these tables offered some depictions on the stakeholders' perspectives and expectations of future workforce, particularly in the area of communication in English at workplace.

Table 2 Communication Skills Desired by Stakeholders

Sub Component	Indicators	Requirement for workplace	Learning outcomes: 'Upon graduation, graduates should be able to…'
Interpersonal Communication	Composure Coordination Attentiveness Expressiveness	Contribute to diplomatic and matured communication between superior, subordinates and clients.	• Speak comfortably with employers, not hindered with nerves. • Pay attention to workplace communications activities and do not get distracted easily (with electronic devises). • Attentive in formal or informal workplace communication which can help build rapport with superiors, colleagues and clients. • Well prepared prior to workplace meetings and planned activities in order to express opinions maturely.
Presentation Skill	Appropriateness	Contribute to sharing of ideas	• Able to share ideas with colleagues

	Credibility Clarity Vividness Voice (rate, pitch, volume)	and thoughts effectively with superior, colleagues and clients.	creatively. • Able to persuade clients to accept their ideas by explaining in a simple yet interesting manner. • Keep spectators' attention using range of presentation skill, with the help of IT as a management tool. • Responding to enquiry from the clients.
Speaking skill	Informative Persuasive Small talks Counter arguing	Contribute to productive and appropriate verbal interactions at workplace.	• Inform audience (superiors, colleagues and clients) in an enlightening manner. • Contributing ideas and give opinions in group discussions. • Persuade superiors, colleagues and clients to accept ideas and opinions using well-defined explanations. • Use specialist vocabulary in a correct manner.
Listening Skill	Comprehend Evaluate Emphatise Critique	Contribute to successful working relationships and effective execution of tasks.	• Ask if one does not understand instruction by superior, colleagues and clients. • Disagree politely if better ideas can be brought up. • Respond appropriately (speech or non-verbal communication) after understanding the instructions, questions, etc. • Give feedback when asked by colleagues, superior and clients after fully understanding the situation.
***Writing Skill**	*not part of CCM.	Contribute to effective execution of tasks at work and making the work flow efficient.	• Filling in forms. • Write memo. • Write minutes of meeting • Write a summary of articles • Write for the company's website • Write formal/informal email messages • Write items for newsletter • Write reports using office template.

CONCLUSION

The present study has yielded findings that add an original contribution to both the theory and practice of English language literacies, focussing on the higher education level. Firstly, it adds to the broader view of workplace literacies by revealing the English language literacy practices in a professional setting situated in the Malaysian context. This study has provided conclusive evidence by documenting Malaysian stakeholders' requirements of workplace literacies for graduates, scrutinising the findings and developing a practical PCS framework in English using a Communication Competence Model (Morealle, Spitzberg and Barge, 2007) as its point of departure. Previously, these skills (i.e. cognitive competence, cultural competence, critical thinking, tasking skills and motivation) were usually treated separately from workplace literacies (Yunus., 2007; UNESCO, 2012). This study differs from previous research in that the skills suggested were treated in parallel with each other. Additionally, since the participants involved in this study came from a variety of professions, it creates a standardised and generic template for all courses in HEIs and can be applied across the board. Future research can delve into PCS in English for specific careers by using the current outcome as a foundation. The PCS in English framework represents one of the main contributions of this study. Additionally, this study has uncovered an implicit aspect that is unique to the context of this study of Malaysian graduates' workplace literacies practices and competencies. It has led to a key insight and sheds light on the stakeholders' urgent need of graduates, not just equipped with PCS in English, but also with certain essential professional attributes or qualities. Stakeholders in this research require future employees to have good, positive attitudes alongside strong PCS in English.

Furthermore, before this there has not been any study that was concerned predominantly with both workplace communication skills and workplace literacy in English. Therefore, this study helps to fill in that gap in the literature by providing qualitative insights into stakeholders' practices and their requirement with regard to communicating in English at the workplace, especially at entry-level. This study provides conclusive evidence of PCS since it sought answers to the issues by examining the problem itself and by having the 'problem-solvers' or the key informants share their insight and experiences, utilising a qualitative research method. Hence, building on the theories and implications informed by previous research, this study turned towards developing an essential yet absent framework on PCS in ESL for Malaysian HEIs.

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