

ANALYSING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE NEEDS OF HUMAN RESOURCE STAFF IN MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES

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ABSTRACT

Human resource (HR) personnel of multinational companies are expected to possess good English language skills. In today's globalised workplaces, HR staff are often confronted with specific language demands in the course of performing their job functions at their workplaces. This study comprised 25 staff and three managers from the HR departments of two American multinational companies in Penang, Malaysia. The primary objective of the study was to identify the English language skills of the HR staff and to investigate the HR staff's perceptions of their English language skills at the workplace. It also aimed to explore any possible differences between the expected English language skills and the actual performance of the HR staff at the workplace. Data were gathered by means of questionnaires and interviews. The findings showed that communicative events such as chairing and speaking in meetings, writing reports, and editing written materials were deemed very important by the respondents. The findings revealed that the HR staff from both companies perceived that they did not perform well in speaking, reading, and writing skills. The implications of this study indicate that the HR personnel need to improve their English language skills and abilities if they wish to function more effectively in their daily tasks at their workplaces.

INTRODUCTION

The on-going globalisation of markets and trade in the 21st century has caused companies to come together to do business internationally. These businesses often gather people from a mixture of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In situations like these, businessmen, negotiators, and those involved in international business usually employ the

English language for communication purposes in multilingual settings. English is becoming the lingua franca of the modern world at a fast rate particularly in such important areas as “the new technologies, business, tourism and entertainment, and its global dominance encourages many speakers of other languages to gain at least a working use of the language in many fields” (Wilson, 2005: 334).

In Rajadurai’s (2004) article *The Faces and Facets of English in Malaysia*, the English language, which is viewed as a medium of communication within and across diverse linguistic and cultural groups at numerous levels of communication, still commands significant respect and prestige even with the complex linguistic tapestry that exists in Malaysia and it is used at an intra- and international level. As a result, Malaysian workers need to possess effective English language skills in order to complete various tasks in their workplaces, especially when Malaysia has a vibrant economy with many multinational companies setting up their base here. These companies play an important role in Malaysia’s economy and it is widely acknowledged that multinational companies are responsible for an increasing share in world trade in the global economy and that a conscious decision must be made in relation to their employees’ English language needs to fit the organisational demands of these companies (Ministry of Human Resources, 17 February, 2004). In Penang, the Penang Development Corporation (PDC) approximates that over the last six years, multinational firms, together with Malaysian companies, have invested some \$2.6 billion here, which produces 60 percent of Malaysia’s electronics exports.

Human resource (HR hereafter) staff find themselves in situations where the ability to communicate well is essential in order to function well at the workplace. Traditionally, HR staff performed the administrative function of an organization, for example, recruiting, interviewing and hiring new staff in accordance with policies and requirements that have been established jointly with top management. However, these days HR staff also work in an advisory capacity, often being in a position of having to convince top and middle-level managers of the value of their ideas, and dealing with people is an important part of the job. Hence, the requirement of communication skills and the ability to speak and write effectively in English are given prominence in the sector (Maimunah Aminuddin, 2005). Since English is a global language commonly employed by multinational companies in Malaysia, HR employees are expected to be proficient in the language to ease communication in and outside the workplace for job purposes. Most HR staff are responsible for implementing human resource management’s training and development programmes at their workplaces. They are also responsible for a variety of clerical duties with the human resource function and this aspect requires them to possess good English language abilities. According to McNamara (1999), HR management includes a variety of activities, mainly making decisions on what staffing needs a company has and whether to use independent contractors or hire employees to fill these needs; and making sure that personnel and management practices keep to various regulations. Additionally the HR department also manages the company’s approach to employee benefits and compensation, employee records and personnel policies (McNamara, 1999).

There is ongoing debate on the importance of the English language in Malaysia and it receives much coverage in the local media. In 2008, institutions of higher learning in the country produced 175,806 graduates but only 55.1% of these graduates found employment within half a year (The STAR, 12 April 2009). Due to the demand for higher education, the number of graduates will continue to increase but the employment prospects might not, especially in today's economic gloom. For graduates with weak English language proficiency, the prospect of securing employment might take longer as most employers in multinational companies seek to hire graduates with good English language skills. A recent survey conducted by the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDEC) on IT students in Malaysia reports that many employers choose not to hire local graduates because they have "poor command of the English language, they lack general knowledge, have poor problem-solving skills and they applied for jobs that are not relevant to their experience" (The STAR, 12 April 2009). Many HR graduates from higher education institutions in Malaysia can be included in these descriptions as well. As stated by an experienced HR manager from a multinational company in Penang, HR staff often experience problems in interpretation when reading in English due to their limited English language proficiency and weak vocabulary. Other problems included having 'satisfactory' writing skills, speaking English at an intermediate level, experiencing problems understanding native speakers who speak fast or with a foreign accent and using effective vocabulary to express ideas and thoughts.

This indicates that it is important to accurately identify and analyse the English language needs of HR staff in multinational companies based in Penang as the state is an important industrial base for future economic growth and prosperity. In this study, the differences between the expected English language skills perceived by the managers and the actual perceptions of the HR staff at the workplace will be explored.

Framing Workplace Literacy and English Language Needs in ESP Contexts

For many employees, the concept of workplace literacy in today's globalised workplaces encompasses dimensions that incorporate goal-oriented strategies that address the changes the shape and character of people for the better. Many organizations refer to it as a set of language skills (namely written and oral) and cognitive and behavioural skills which are considered significant to the competitive edge of business organizations. Global workplaces continue to make demands on their workers in relation to literacy demands and these demands are getting increasingly complex especially with the incorporation of creative technology at workplaces to boost efficiency and productivity.

The term 'workplace literacy' has been used to describe a set of skills, namely written, oral, cognitive and behavioural, which are considered significant to the competitive edge of business organizations. Increasingly, employers in numerous business organisations in the contemporary world assert complex literacy demands on their employees requiring their employees to enhance their communication skills and handle the interface of technology competently in their daily tasks. Because of its universal appeal, English has become a part of workplace literacy programmes in many organizations. Additionally, senior management recognize the importance of the HR department to a company's

financial success and require it to be well organized and pro-active in performing a wide range of functions encompassing employment, training and development, payment/reward systems, industrial relations, productivity improvement schemes, health and safety and employee services and welfare. This wide range of workplace literacies imposed on HR staff makes it necessary for employees to be proficient in their communication skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Comstock (1990) states that the ability to listen is the most important of all communication skills in any organization and states that there are problems involving the listening skill at workplaces – there is a tendency at times for some executives, supervisors and workers to talk more and fail to listen and not comprehend the notions of listening and hearing.

An ESP course is meant to enable a group of target learners to function adequately in a target situation, the place where the learners will use the specific English for specific purposes. This study on the English language needs of HR staff leans primarily on aspects drawn up by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998). For Dudley-Evans and St. John, today’s concept of needs analysis includes eight approaches. Table 1 below shows the four approaches that were considered for this study:

Table 1: Approaches used in analyzing English language needs of HR staff

Approach	Specific information for needs analysis
Professional information about the learners	Looks at target situation and objective needs (analyses how English is used at workplace)
Personal information about the learners	Looks at factors which may affect the way learners learn (previous learning experiences)
Language information about target situation	English language information about learners (current skills and language use)
Learners’ lacks	Identify the gaps between how English is used at the workplace and the actual English language abilities of target learners

Source: adapted from Dudley Evans and St. John (1998)

In line with this framework, the English language needs of the HR staff will also be investigated based on additional features derived from Hutchinson and Waters (1992) in identifying the target learners’ ‘necessities’ (the type of need determined by what is required in the target situation), ‘lacks’ and ‘wants’. . The “why”, “how”, “what”, “who”, “where” and “when” questions in Hutchinson and Waters’ (1992) target situation analysis (TSA) framework will be adhered to when formulating the questionnaire and interview questions.

METHODOLOGY

HR departments from two American multinational electronics companies in Penang were selected for this study. While questionnaires were sent out by email to 33 HR staff, the final sample for analysis comprised 3 managers and 25 HR staff from both companies. The staff sample consisted of personnel with the following job descriptions: officers, executives, HR assistants and clerks. The findings of the study were based on data obtained from questionnaires distributed to the staff and from interviews with the staff and managers. Questionnaires and interviews were used as instruments in the study because quantitative and qualitative methods have their respective advantages and limitations. Therefore, a combination of both methods was deemed necessary in order to obtain the best results.

The construction of the questionnaire was based the theoretical framework on needs analysis mentioned in the earlier section. The “why”, “how”, “what”, “who”, “where”, and “when” questions in Hutchinson and Waters’ (1992) target situation analysis (TSA) framework were also adhered to when formulating items in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was pilot tested upon its completion because as Mowbray and Yoshihama (2001: 157) state, “conducting sufficient pilot tests are critical to producing a survey that is valid and reliable across multiple contexts”. From the pilot study (sample of 8 HR staff from a third multinational company not participating in this study), the researcher discovered from feedback provided by the respondents that some changes were required in the questionnaire. After modifications to the questionnaire were made, the researcher re-tested the questionnaire on the same group of respondents who participated in the first pilot study. After the re-testing, the questionnaire was ready to be used for data-gathering in the actual study.

In addition to the questionnaire, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with staff and managers to cross check responses provided by the staff in the questionnaire. Quantitative research alone will not provide sufficient information for this study, therefore qualitative research is also required to gather information which is more subjective. The interview questions were adapted from Lee (2004) and Munchar (1999) and like the questionnaire, the interview questions underwent a pilot test before being used for the actual study.

Electronic mail (e-mail hereafter) was used to distribute and collect part of the questionnaire from the respondents. There were staff who, perhaps due to work commitments, did not respond to the questionnaires via e-mails even when polite reminders were sent. In this regard, some staff (n=8) stated that they preferred to state their responses on paper. The researchers gave them printed copies of the questionnaires and then went back to the companies to collect the completed questionnaires. The questionnaires were conducted by one of the researchers in the presence of the respondents so that the researcher will be able to provide further explanation regarding the questions to the subjects if the need arose.

Both the HR companies requested to remain anonymous and (for ethical reasons) will be referred to as ‘Company X’ and ‘Company Y’. The researchers received a total of 25 questionnaire responses from the staff and managed to interview five HR staff and three

HR managers. 12 staff from Company X participated in the questionnaire survey, while three staff and two managers were interviewed. 13 staff from Company Y responded to the questionnaire survey, and interviews were conducted with two HR staff and a manager.

FINDINGS

Discussion of findings from company X

Half of the staff who participated in this study had been working in Company X between 16 to 30 years and most of them were graduates. In terms of English language qualifications, only 2 staff (16.7%) had distinctions in the SPM (equivalent to 'O' level) English paper while 50% of them had a credit. Although proficiency in English and its skills are required and always used at the HR department of Company X for many purposes, the majority of the staff perceived that they did not have excellent English language qualifications.

Listening skills were rated as being important in the HR department of this company. However, the staff perceived themselves as not having good listening skills: most of them claimed that they performed "fairly" in most communicative events. The respondents generally saw the importance of speaking skills the same way they saw their listening skills. Despite this, most of the respondents did not perceive their speaking skills to be excellent or good. Nearly all the respondents regarded every communicative event in the reading skills category as "very important" or "important". Although reading skills are vital in this company's HR department, the majority of respondents only felt that they were "fair" in every communicative event. Most of the respondents considered 83% of the communicative events in the writing skills category "very important". Nevertheless, this skill seems to be the respondents' weakest, with a number of them stating in every communicative event that they were "poor". Table 2 below presents respondents' responses on the situations they use English at their workplace:

Table 2: Situations and frequency of English language use at company X (n=12)

Situation	Always		Often		Sometimes		Never	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Meetings	12	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
Interviews	10	83.3	0	0	2	16.7	0	0
Discussions	8	66.7	4	33.3	0	0	0	0
Training	12	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
Others	1	8.3	0	0	0	0	0	0

Most of the interviewees claimed that they were "satisfied" with their English language skills during the interview, but their standards were not in line with the company's standards. One of the managers who was interviewed said that the staff's abilities were only of intermediate level. Both managers and staff agree that listening is the staff's

strongest skill, with writing being their weakest skill. These perceptions reflect the staff's responses from the questionnaire.

The staff said that their American colleagues felt that their English language abilities were "acceptable" or "quite good". However, the managers felt that the staff in general, did not understand some words, terms, expressions, spelling, and pronunciations used by the Americans at times. English is also important in the HR department of this company because of modern technology often used by the staff. The two managers who were interviewed stressed the importance of the English language competency of their staff at their workplace stating that "*they need to improve their language skills as our company has global connections*". One of the managers was concerned that some employees "*were using too much Malaysian English at work – you know ending sentence with 'lah' 'mah' and 'ah' - and they really need to keep a tab on this as our company policy is that we want to encourage standard English use among all staff*". Overall, English is always used, unless the staff whom they are communicating with cannot communicate in English. These staff are usually lower-level staff from other departments.

From the analysis of the results of the questionnaire survey, the staff's abilities did not match what is actually required of them by the company. The problems encountered by the staff are seen by the managers as a handicap. The staff were all willing to attend English language classes at their workplace.

Discussion of findings from company Y

The HR staff of Company Y had been working in the company between one to 10 years (8 of them had worked for more than 6 years). Most of them (61.6%) possess degrees, and other than a few outstanding results in English examinations, most did not perform well in them. Nearly every staff felt that English is required at their workplace for various reasons and that English is always used during important activities. Nearly all of them stated that the four English language skills are "very important" for their jobs, as shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: The reasons for English language use at company Y (n=13)

Reasons for English language use	Total	%
1. I am required to use English at work	13	100
2. It is a language commonly used by my employer	13	100
3. It is a language commonly used by my colleagues	12	92.3
4. It is a language commonly used by outsiders	10	76.9
5. Using English at the workplace makes my job easier	13	100
6. I use English to communicate with staff from other departments	10	76.9
7. I use English when resolving workplace conflicts involving staff from other departments	10	76.9
8. English is important for job promotions	10	76.9
9. I use English because the parent company uses English	13	100
10. Other reasons	0	0

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For the communicative events in the listening skills category, the respondents' perceptions of its importance ranged from "very important" and "important". The majority of the respondents did not have problems with listening. All communicative events in the speaking skills category were considered "very important" or "important" by the majority of the respondents. Nevertheless, many of the staff felt they did not perform well in speaking, the most obvious communicative event being chairing and speaking in meetings, doing oral presentation and public speaking. The communicative events in the reading skills category were generally considered "very important" or "important" by the respondents, but 30.8% - 38.5% felt that they were "fair" in every communicative event, while 15.4% thought that they were poor in every communicative event. Writing skills were given the same level of importance as the other skills. However, the respondents did not have positive perceptions towards their writing skills, with 84.6% of the respondents stating that they were between "fair" and "poor" in this language skill.

The staff who were interviewed felt that every language skill was important. One of the staff who was interviewed said *"my typical working day is very busy and I'm often busy with matters that require counseling and disciplinary matters involving employees and these situations require me to use good English so I can be understood well"*. Another of the staff stated that *"English is used a lot at work but I think my English is just average; of course I need to work on improving my writing skills ...you know I use technology to communicate, such as working on Excel and Microsoft Office and it's important for me to communicate effectively in English in emails"*. The manager at this company claimed that the staff's English language skills were generally good, although not all possessed excellent ability in communicating effectively in English. He raised the point that *"most HR staff deal with routine matters about 20% of the time and they need to deal effectively in English when they speak, write and listen.....mostly, I'm happy to say that our HR staff are generally good in their communication skills in English"*. However, during the course of the interview, he commented that it would be good if the staff's English language skills were better as *"some of the staff need to improve their writing ability in English"*.

In terms of the respondents' perceptions, most of the staff thought that listening and speaking were their strongest language skills. From the analysis of the questionnaire, it was revealed that the staff of the HR department of Company Y hardly experienced problems with listening, although they admitted facing difficulty with the speaking skill. The manager, however, had a different opinion and felt that the staff were good at reading. Nevertheless, all of them stated that writing was the staff's weakest skill. One staff mentioned that her American colleagues considered her English 'average'. Other Malaysian staff from the same department sometimes encountered problems when communicating with colleagues from the United States because their spoken English was not good enough. However, the manager said that his staff generally did not experience problems communicating with the Americans.

From the analysis of the results of the questionnaire survey, the English language skills of the HR staff of this company do not match the requirements of the English language skills that they require in order to function well at their workplace. The only skill that they are competent at is the listening skill. The manager stated that it would be better if the staff had better English language skills. When asked if they needed to attend English classes, most of the staff stated that they did not mind attending English classes to further hone their language abilities.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that there are differences which exist between the expected English language skills and the actual performance of the HR staff. In the staff's opinion, all four English language skills are required by the HR staff at the workplace. Generally, listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills were all given the same level of importance. However, the HR staff at both the companies perceived that they did not possess satisfactory English language skills which would allow them to perform well in their jobs as well and their managers' comments also support this fact.

As most of the staff expressed the view that they were not satisfied with their current English language abilities, it is recommended that the management of both companies look into the possibility of arranging for English for specific purposes (ESP) classes for the HR staff. The result of the needs analysis suggest that the HR staff would greatly benefit from such content specific English classes as it would contribute significantly to their future performance at their jobs. In order to stimulate and motivate learners, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 172) suggest that materials used in ESP classes need "to be challenging yet achievable; to offer new ideas and information whilst being grounded in the learners' experience and knowledge and to encourage fun and creativity". Instructors can motivate learners by informing them about the importance of improving their English language skills. This is very important as the HR staff have previously learned English language skills during their school-going days and have expressed a desire to attend training courses in enhancing their English language ability in an effort to boost their self confidence in using English more effectively to perform their job functions. Additionally, private and government institutions of education offering courses in HR should form collaborations with HR departments to note the English language skills and repertoires that are essential for HR staff.

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