

Needs Analysis for Oral Communication at the Workplace: A Case Study of English Language Requirements for Engineers in an Automotive Company

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, calls have been made for graduates to be proficient in oral, written and communication skills so that they can function effectively at the workplace (Crosling & Ward, 2002). In Malaysia, all sectors of industries including private and civil services demand that graduates should equip themselves with language and communication skills in order to play their role effectively at the workplace (Chang, 2004; Ungku Harun, 2004). Most importantly, employers expect the young graduates who enter the job market to possess adequate proficiency and skills of the English language (Chang, 2004; Phang, 2006). Lagging in these skills is one of the factors to local graduates' unemployment. To understand the employers' demand and fulfill this need, it is essential to carry out a need analysis on the requirements for language proficiency and communication skills as necessitated especially by the engineering employers. This paper therefore reports on a case study which aimed to explore the requirements for language skills among engineers and the communicative events where English is to be utilized. A former automotive engineer now an academician was interviewed using a semi structured interview for data collection. Results indicate that the dominance of the English language as an international language for all engineers in most of the communicative events is beyond dispute.

Keywords: Needs Analysis, Oral Communication Skills, Workplace Communication

INTRODUCTION

Much has been discussed on the issues of Malaysian university graduates lack of proficiency and communication skills in the English language at the workplace. Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) stated that one of the predicaments faced by the employers in the recruitment process is that although the local candidates are highly qualified, but poor English language skills prevent the employers from hiring them (MEF, 2004). In 2006, the Malaysian government reported that 45,000 local college graduates were unemployed mainly due to lack of proficiency in the English language, and this daunting number was especially true in the private industries and multi-national companies (Phang, 2006). Furthermore, impact and employment surveys conducted by Malaysian companies such as JobStreet.com, an Internet Jobsite company (Chang, 2004), Multimedia Development Corporation (Ungku Harun, 2004) and KWX Sdn Bhd, a subsidiary of MSC Management Services Sdn Bhd (Ungku Harun, 2004) all reported that the lack of English skills namely oral and writing skills and communication skills contributed to local graduates' unemployment. Being one of the growing sectors in Malaysia, the employers of the engineering industries are also demanding that local engineering graduates come to them with proficient and competent language and communication skills.

While claims have been made by employers that the local graduates are not sufficiently competent in the English language and its skills, English language instructors are puzzled as in what specific situations are such proficiency required. By identifying specific communicative events where employers expect the engineers to be proficient such as in conducting sales negotiation or ensuring business networking, these instances can be included in the class activities or modules of the English language syllabi. From this, students would become aware of what they are expected of in the actual working environment. Prompted by this apparent reality, therefore, language

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instructors, syllabus designers and educators need to understand what the employers really want from the local engineering graduates to have so that curriculum and syllabus can be moulded and designed to fit this need.

UNDERSTANDING NEEDS ANALYSIS

Needs analysis (NA) is a common concept in many European and English speaking countries (Richards, 2001). Historically, the formal concept of NA was largely established during the 1970s by the Council of Europe in the field of ESP (Richterich, 1983 cited in Duong, 2007) although the term 'analysis of needs' first appeared in India in the 1920s. West (1994) also states that before the 1970s, NA was generally very informal and very few research was done as language teachers based their teaching on "some kind of intuitive or informal analysis of students' needs" (p.1). Later, a much more detailed analysis of NA was provided when Munby (1978), having a considerable influence with his instrument in profiling students' needs, began to develop NA instrument over the 1970s period.

Presently, the focus of NA is now moving from outsider's view which focuses on the "notion and functions supposedly required satisfying various occupational languages to insiders' views such as the company employees in the target language situations" (Long, 2005, p. 21 cited in Cowling, 2007). The current concept of needs analysis in the area of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), on the other hand, includes consideration of the professional information about the learners, the tasks and activities which learners need to use English and target situation analysis and objective needs of the course (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Tudor (1996) however gives learning needs a central position in his approach whilst Richards (2001) suggests that syllabus design is a response to 'needs' and 'situation'. In another angle, Nunan focuses the definition of NA more on the information-gathering process, he refers to NA as "techniques and procedures for collecting information to be used in syllabus design" (1988, p.13). In broader terms NA can be described as identifying "what learners will be required to do with the foreign language in the target situation and how learners might best master the target language during the period of training" (West, 1994, p.1).

So far as language is concerned, needs analysis is the process of identifying the students' reasons for studying a language. It refers to the procedure for identifying general and specific language needs of students so that appropriate goals, objectives and content in courses can be developed (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Richterich (1983) claims that the purpose of a needs assessment is to provide the means by which to obtain a wider range of input into the content, design and implementation of a language program by incorporating people such as learners, teachers, administrators and employers in the planning process. Therefore, a needs assessment helps to identify general or specific language needs which can be addressed in developing goals, objectives and content for an existing program. To encapsulate all the definitions, Brown (1995) states that needs analysis "refers to the activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the learning needs of a particular group of students" (p.35). Conducting needs analysis for language syllabus design from the perspectives of employers is vital in order to understand the authentic workplace communication needs as the input will be used as the basis in the process of syllabus design.

A NEED FOR NEEDS ANALYSIS

Studies on needs analysis (NA) reported by Cowling (2007) indicated that many researchers such as Gardner and Winslow (1983), Long (2005), Richterich (1983) and West (1994) discovered that often there occurred a lack of awareness on the existence of NA as a tool in English for Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) course design. This is especially true in general English courses where the specific needs of students are difficult to determine. Studies which emphasized on learners' needs and their future language use are very important as goals and objectives of the course can be determined, a process which involves consideration of specific grammatical functions, terminology comprehension and the abilities required for future workplace communication (Jiajing, 2007). However, one area that has placed considerable attention to NA is ESP (Jasso-