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UMS ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF'S FEEDBACK AND EXPERIENCE IN THE 'ENGLISH FOR WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION' COURSE

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Abstract:

The feedback from course participants on what should be included in a programme or course is crucial for further improvement. In light of this setting, this study explores how well the course objectives are met by the "English for Workplace Communication" course. Such input is primarily intended to improve the course's quality and to give the facilitators immediate feedback. The study focuses on how well the administrative staff understands the course material, critical to their demands for oral and written communication in the workplace. A survey was conducted with a qualitative method using a reflective journal on a group of administrative personnel at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. The larger of these dealt with aspects of oral and written communication and the course's overall reflection. The study's findings discussed the participants' input on the 'English for Workplace Communication' and their experiences during the one-day course. These positively integrated learning conditions may lead to productive performance, not only in the professional competence of participants but may also affect their English proficiency.

Keywords:

English For Specific Purposes, Oral Communication, Written Communication, Course Feedback, Staff

Introduction

Feedback on what constitutes an English course that is useful, practical and important can help enhance a course's effectiveness. Against this context, this study explores the degree to which the learning objectives are fulfilled by the 'English for Workplace Communication' course. It is important to note that the primary aim of such feedback is to provide the facilitator with constructive input to enhance the quality of the course. According to Harding (2007), the advancement of communication and technology over the years has significantly impacted English language programmes. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has developed as one of the most prominent areas of language learning from the early 1960s until today. This progress is reflected in the number of universities offering ESP subjects worldwide in English-speaking countries and offering it to international students (Harding, 2007; Hyland, 2006; Orr, 2008). This development is also depicted in the publication of international ESP journals such as the English for Specific Purposes journal and The Asian ESP Journal. The paper is dedicated to identifying elements of ESP and how it can be expanded. With ESP Special Interest Groups (SIGs) established within professional associations such as IATEL and TESOL, ESP has also gained worldwide interest.

Problem Statement

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP is a way of teaching languages in which all decisions regarding the method and content are made in light of the learner's motivation. The term "ESP" suggests that English is unique to the spectrum of principles and procedures outlined inside particular professions. The "English for Workplace Communication" course, intended to address the UMS administrative staff's demands to provide them with advanced workplace communication skills and topic-content knowledge concerning their professional requirements, is the subject of interest in this study. The course seeks to reinforce participants' acquisition of oral and written communication in English for the workplace. In addition, it presents a simulated workplace context where the administrative staff were required to use the English language appropriately and accurately in communication. To meet these linguistic demands, they undertook various activities to familiarise themselves with a wide range of genres in spoken and written communication related to their job specifications. These genres included work-related documents, formal correspondences, and speeches for special occasions. The activities provided participants with hands-on opportunities to practise and apply their English language skills.

Similar to other educational endeavours, ESP practitioners recognise deficiencies that challenge a course's effectiveness, and overcoming these obstacles would lead to more significant progress and enhancement of the course. However, unlike other instructional methods, the challenges are unique to individuals in this context. Therefore it is essential to delineate and resolve them with tailored-to-fit instructions carefully. In the case of this research, the participants are exposed to focus on meaning in the subject-matter field. English is not presented as a subject to be learned, nor is it to be developed as mechanical skills or habits. English should be delivered in authentic contexts to make the participants acquainted with the particular ways the language is used in functions they will need to perform in their fields or jobs. They should be aware of the purposes for which they must use English. Subject area knowledge allowed them to identify an authentic context for the course's vocabulary and structure. Thus, the participants in this study could take advantage of what they already know about the subject matter.

On the contrary, the connection between both language usage and the subject content area may not be known or familiar to some participants. Research has shown that the more content-specific the course, the more participants will find it valuable and motivated. In reality, however, there may be a conflict between the notion of knowing and the course's implementation. The subject-specific approach should allow participants to acquire the targeted skills better since it is focused on the specific needs of their professional roles. It is also essential to obtain feedback from the participants to evaluate whether the course contents match their needs.

Literature Review

An overview of the literature reveals the importance of need analysis or learners' feedback and teaching materials evaluation as the determining factors for adjusting a specific course to meet the learners' needs or the course goals. Learners' needs constantly change in the global economy due to the varying socio-economic situation that dictates their needs. Thus, it is crucial to follow these changes and reacts to them. Davies (2006), in a survey, showed that "learners do want and appreciate the opportunity to express their views about their course and wish to exercise some degree of control over the way the course proceeds" (p. 8). Furthermore, collecting participants' feedback using a questionnaire is considered a critical educational practice, particularly in the workplace, where this survey is regularly conducted (Conrad, 1999; Long, 1997; Spratt, 1999). This is necessary to ensure that the course meets the participants' requirements and goals.

Feedback is necessary and is an essential part of effective learning. Feedback aims to help participants understand the subject being taught and give them a clear direction on how to improve their knowledge. Bellon, Bellon, and Blank (1991) stated that feedback is more strongly related to achievement than other teaching traits...this relationship is consistent regardless of grade, socio-economic status, race, or setting.

For Basturkmen (2002), implementing skill-negotiation patterns of organisation and activity in seminar-type discussions can enable learners to participate spontaneously and effectively in actual seminars. Spector-Cohen et al. (2001) also thought it was essential to design reading tasks that mirrored real-life activities, while Mavor & Trayner (2001) viewed interdisciplinary and cooperation between English and content instructors as the convenient and efficient approach to developing a highly productive course. If the ESP practitioner is aware of the participants' purposes for acquiring English and knows both its concrete (lexis, structure, skills) and discrete elements, s/he can collaborate with the content specialists in implementing the right processes to help the participants acquire practice in the relevant fields

In this era of globalisation, the role of the English language in career advancement is undeniable. Although English language proficiency is not the only criterion for career development, its significance is widely recognised in the corporate world. While low-paying jobs may not require an advanced level of English proficiency, many organisations expect graduates to have an intermediate level of language proficiency to fulfil their duties. Many research reports today emphasise the relationship between English and employability worldwide. Due to the globalised market, employees need to have day-to-day business dealings and communication with executives from different parts of the world. To have unambiguous and clear-cut transmission of information to all participants, activities such as emails, online chat, and business presentations require 'above-average language skills.

Many research studies conducted in various Asian countries have identified that English helps improve job performance and boosts promotion prospects. Ojanperä Miina (2014) points out that poor English language skills slow down efficient communication flows, trigger misinterpretation, create frustration, and create employee barriers. English is the most frequently used language in the corporate world, and knowledge of English has become one of the essential skills for employability. Proper English means the ability to make grammatically correct sentences and other related communication skills, such as presentation skills, persuasive and negotiating skills and interpersonal skills using English. Because of the global market, English language requirements are likely to increase yearly, and it may be challenging for employees without adequate English language skills to advance professionally. According to a study by Zainuddin, Siti Zaidah, Pillai, Dumanig, and Phillip (2019), both learners and businesses recognise the value of English for employability. All sides agreed that proper grammar and a vast vocabulary are essential, but the results showed considerable differences between student opinions and employer expectations. Because of this, the complexity of developing a highly skilled workforce in Malaysia will largely depend on the many stakeholders in the educational system and the pertinent businesses. Hiring those with advanced degrees would stimulate the economy of the country.

English at Work: Global Workplace Language Skills Study's (2016) survey results show that English language skills are essential for over 95% of employers in many non-native English-speaking countries. There are many English requirements in countries where English is not a native or official language, with 7 per cent of job tasks requiring native-level English, 49 per cent requiring advanced English, 33 per cent requiring intermediate English, and 8 per cent requiring basic English. The results showed a difference between the requisite English language skills and the available skills in every industry. Interestingly, there is no difference between large, medium-sized and tiny employers. There is at least a 40 per cent English skills shortage in all organisational sizes. The findings are based on data from 5,373 employers in 38 countries who finished the annual QS Global Workplace Survey.

Methodology

The study involved 20 administrative staff from Universiti Malaysia Sabah who completed the one-day 'English for Workplace Communication' course. Only 20 staff members were required because each course could only have a certain number of participants. They are selected based on their positions within the Human Resources division. After completing the course, a survey was circulated to the employees. In total, 20 participants responded to the survey. Information such as gender, age, and personal feedback on the one-day course was collected. Among the participants, 60 per cent were women, and 40 per cent were men. Seventy-one per cent of the respondents were between 20 to 30 years old, 23 per cent were between 31 to 40 years old, and 6 per cent were between 41-50 years old. A qualitative research method was used to understand the development of content skills and issues that emerged from staff experiences during the two-day course. As Shank (2002) pointed out, feedback and observation systems have allowed researchers to understand individual socialisation in workplace realities better. Guba (1990) posited that realities exist in the form of psychological constructions ... [which are] dependent for their form and content on the persons who hold them". (p. 27) Methods for data collection are through personal reflections. At the end of the course, the researchers compiled a personal reflection recording of the participants' experiences, which will provide "tools of the trade" for future participants. On the first day, participants were briefed on what to do during the course and wrote down what they thought about the course, what they learned, and what the

recommendations were to improve the course. The data is analysed through their written reflection based on the responses gathered.

Result and Discussion

Demography

1 Gender

Skills	Percentages
Male	40.0%
Female	60.0%

2 Age

Skills	Percentages
20 – 30 years old	71.0%
31 – 40 years old	23.0%
41 – 50 years old	6.0%

Important Skills

3 Which skills are essential to you?

Skills	Percentages
Oral	55.0%
Written	45.0%

4 Which of these area(s) is your area of weakness?

Skills	Percentages
Oral	20.0%
Written	30.0%
Both	50.0%

5 The values of language skills in the workplace.

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Indecisive	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<i>Poor communication skills in English impair the chances of recruitment during interviews.</i>	75%	20%	0%	5%	0%
<i>English language skill influences my career in many aspects.</i>	55%	35%	0%	10%	0%
<i>Language training programs should be conducted in the workplace to improve the quality of language skills.</i>	90%	10%	0%	0%	0%

<i>The University education system should focus on English skills required for employability.</i>	85%	15%	0%	0%	0%
<i>English language skills are mandatory for finding a suitable job.</i>	65%	25%	10%	0%	0%

When asked about the skills vital to them, most respondents (55 per cent) chose oral skills and writing the second (45 per cent). When asked to identify their areas of weakness, 20 per cent selected oral, 30 per cent opted for written, while the majority of the respondents (50 per cent) selected both oral and written skills. When asked about the value of language skills in the workplace, it was accepted that 75 per cent of respondents believe a lack of English language skills lowers the opportunities to secure jobs during interviews. Fifty-five per cent of respondents acknowledged that their English language skills impacted their career in various aspects. A high number of participants, 90 per cent, think that language training programs should be conducted in the workplace to improve the quality of language skills. 65.5 per cent of the respondents felt that English skills are mandatory for seeking suitable jobs.

6 What do you think of the course?

Regarding English language skills, the participants could write down their thoughts. Participants suggested that the language that allows them to interact everywhere they go is English. Some said that without thinking about errors and grammar, one should be brave and confident enough to speak. For example, today's IT industry needs a person to interact in English with clients and stakeholders. They are expected to provide presentations or business reviews on most occasions for businesses that call for better English speaking and writing skills. In today's world, English proficiency undeniably plays a mandatory role. Each participant decided that each employee's English language proficiency was the cornerstone.

7 What have you learnt from this course? How are the oral communication aspects relevant to the workplace?

Some participants stressed the importance of English during interviews. Communication in English, since globalisation, is no longer an option but a necessary one. They have to demonstrate the strengths of using language skills during the interview process, however good an employee is in his technical skills. In addition, one must understand/interpret the language/strong vocabulary of the interviewer used during the interview to assess the applicant's language proficiency. One participant said that the need for successful language skills becomes compulsory once you enter a leadership position. Many respondents consider oral communication skills the most relevant since they sometimes need to communicate in English. In addition, their employers do not provide English language instruction, but the participants were interested in enrolling in courses that would help them develop their English skills.

8 What are the recommendations on how to improve the course?

Most participants suggested that the course should be balanced with more hands-on tasks. Some have said they are shy and need more realistic exposure to allow them to participate and learn more. Hands-on learning is ideally positioned, apart from severe shyness or anxiety, to

assist or elevate any form of learner. Everyone has unique preferences when it comes to their learning style. The facilitator can be heard by participants who tend to listen to their learning.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the staff's feedback on the 'English for Workplace Communication' course and their experiences during the one-day course. These positively interconnected learning conditions can contribute to practical outcomes in participants' professional competence and might affect their English proficiency. Consequently, these positive experiences will contribute to their motivation to learn. Hence, it can be concluded that the integration of oral and written communication topics in the course should be retained. The study results also suggest that the occupational issues be broadened to make them applicable to other fields of study. Case studies on staff in different professional areas should be conducted to seek other potential forms of material development, programme design and implementation. Thus, it can fill in the gap in ESP research on employability. According to a study by Kamlun, Jawing, and Gansau (2020), other factors could affect graduate employment besides English language proficiency, which has a significant but not a major impact on graduate employability. While this study indicates a link between low English proficiency and graduates' employability, it is equally essential for the university and stakeholders to reevaluate the curriculum's alignment with industry demands to look into factors other than English proficiency that may contribute to graduates' low employability rates. For administrative employees to increase their English proficiency for everyday use, it is equally important to expose them to basic English training.

Therefore, there is a need to revise the course content to meet the administrative staff's requirement to continue their professional development. In their study, Jawing & Kamlun (2022) noted that the curriculum of a course should be revised. The revision is to meet the growing demands for a more job-relevant curriculum and work-ready content the curriculum to support participants or learners in success in the emerging global landscape (incorporated via nurturing both hemispheres of the brain). As a result, the shifting educational landscape and restructured university curricula might prepare and equip learners with more relevant. Up-to-date professional skills are needed in various jobs and work circumstances, allowing them to acquire and demonstrate the essential competencies during the IR4.0 era.

The limitation of this study is that data were received only from the UMS staff's point of view. Therefore, their perceptions constitute the only data on the effectiveness and usefulness of the 'English for Workplace Communication' course. There was also no data on whether the skills taught were applicable in their workplace after the course.

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