

ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMMUNICATIVE ABILITY AT THE WORKPLACE : ARE THE STUDENTS READY?

Sheema Liza Idris

Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Pahang

Hazlin Hassan

Faculty of Office Management and Technology, Universiti Teknologi MARA Pahang

ABSTRACT

English Language Communicative ability is an important aspect for students in order for them to survive once they have graduated in order to be accepted for the workplace. We hear a lot of comments that have been put upon graduates who are left jobless, and one of the reasons is their inability in communicating in English. The argument on the inability of graduates who are incapable of communicating and using the English Language well has brought us to discuss this issue. Despite having all the compulsory English courses at the university level, graduates and business executives are still facing a lot of problems when communicating with people. No matter whether it is the basic oral skills or the writing skills, they face difficulties in expressing themselves. Thus, this study is carried out to see whether the graduating students of Diploma in Office Management and Technology (OM) of UiTM Pahang are well prepared and equipped for the workplace in terms of their English Communicative ability. It could later provide a common ground for further discussion and debate on this issue. On top of this, it could also provide feedback for the management of the university to make any decision which could lead to the improvement of the current situation.

INTRODUCTION

Hagan (2003) found that most graduates 'were rated as comparatively poor in the areas of written and oral business communication skills' (in Hagan 2004 : 2). We do know that communication skills are required by almost every company and that without the skills, one could not be selected for the job applied. As stated by. Morreale et al. (2004 : 4), 'Employers identify communication as one of the basic competencies every graduate should have, asserting that the ability to communicate is valuable for obtaining employment and maintaining successful job performance'.

Since talks on the importance of English language has been on the rise, and it has always been the graduating Malays that have been unemployed due to their inability of using the English Language, it is strongly believed that as a university that solely concentrates on Malay and Bumiputra students, UiTM should have a greater concern on what their graduates might become of. In other words, UiTM should not be contributing to the number of unemployed graduates.

Thus, this study seeks to find out whether the graduating students of UiTM Pahang feel that they are well equipped and prepared to go out to work with the existing communicative ability in order to meet the necessary requirements at the workplace and to perform their task effectively and productively. Specifically, it is also to find out whether the courses offered by the University are adequate and sufficient for the graduating students in preparing them for the workplace.

English Language Communicative Ability at Workplace

English Language Communicative ability or English Language Competence does not only include pronunciation, structure, and vocabulary which form one's knowledge of a language, but it also includes the ability to communicate in social settings, to use English academically in the content areas, and to use English in culturally appropriate ways (Portland Public Schools 2005). Hymes (1974) defined 'Communicative Competence' as what a speaker needs to know to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community. Thus, it is very important for students to have this competency in order to prepare themselves at the workplace.

A number of researchers have agreed upon the importance of communication skills at the work place regardless the field that one is involved in. For example, Lee and Blaszczynski (1999), Lau and Ran (1993), stated that surveys have been conducted and confirmed that communication skills are important especially in preparing students who are going to work in the accounting field (cited in Christensen and Rees 2002). In addition, Watson et al. (1990), Todd et al. (1995), Guinan (1988), Tan (1994) and Bostrom (1989) have also highlighted on this fact and proven it by quoting a number of researchers stating that it is also important for information system (IS) professionals or majors to have good communication skills (cited in Becker, Insley and Endres 1997). Hynes & Bhatia also highlighted that communication skills in critical for business' success (cited in Stevens 2004).

Many studies have also been carried out to see whether graduates and employees are able to communicate effectively or not either in the spoken or written form. Chan (1994) in her study on communicative competence among frontliners in local companies, noted that these frontliners were tactless, as commented by many of their clients' feedback. Question like "Why you want to close your account, huh?" was asked instead of a more tactful question like "May I ask why you have decided to withdraw or close your account?" (Chan 1994 in Kamisah et al. 2004 : 51). This clearly illustrates poor communicative ability among the frontliners. It is important for speakers to be able to use the language wisely in any context because communication does not only mean speech acts, but also participation in conversation, engaging in different types of discourse, and sustaining interaction in complex speech events.

Along the same line, Christensen and Rees (2002) studied on the importance of communication skills for entry level as accountants. They studied on the specific communication skills that are needed. They looked at the 32 relative importance of business communication skills and at the same time investigate the level of satisfaction in preparing students in those skills. From the study they found that English and writing skills should be given more emphasized. The existing communication skills emphasis in the curriculum is considered suitable but there is always room for improvement.

Becker, Insley and Endres (1997), investigate and analyze on the current and desired level of communication skills for information systems (IS) personnel as perceived by their managers. The study was also done to look at the expected level of communication skills of graduates in the technical field in terms of their communication skills which include reading, writing, speaking, presenting, listening, and non-verbalising skills. From the findings, it was discovered that all the six core communications skills were perceived as highly important, and, thus, implies that it requires new graduates to be good at communication skills. Steven (2004) also aims for employers' satisfaction and what is expected from graduates in terms of their communication skills.

In Malaysia, a lot has been said on the post independence generation in which they have been criticized on their poor command of the language, as put forward by Datuk Ani Arope (1991:1) who was the Chief Executive of the National Electricity Board then, 'the company is not interested in graduate who could just fill in forms and write cheques'. Despite having all the compulsory English courses at the university level, graduates and business executives are still facing a lot of problem when communicating with people. No matter whether it is the basic oral skills or the writing skills, they face difficulties in expressing themselves.

Ironically, Kamisah et. al. (2004) also found from their study that graduates of Universiti Teknologi MARA who are currently working at private sectors around Kuala Lumpur claimed that they are well equipped and well prepared with necessary linguistic skills before entering the workplace. However, their employers feel differently. They say that these students are not performing as expected.

English Courses for Diploma in Office Management and Technology

Diploma in Office Management and Technology is a programme offered by the Faculty of Office Management and Technology. It is a programme that focuses on the office administration of any organization, with emphasis on the office procedures, office management, office automation, office competencies, communication, personality development and second as well as third languages.

Students who are taking Diploma in Office Management and Technology have to undergo the English Language courses from semester 1 up to semester 6, except for semester 5, in which, they have to go

through a Practical Training. From semesters 1 to 3, students have to take the language development courses which are Preparatory English (BEL100), Mainstream English I (BEL200), and Mainstream English II (BEL250) respectively. These courses are mainly to build a strong foundation of their English Language and at the same time, prepare these students for their (Malaysian University Entry Test) MUET exam. Once they have completed these courses, the students have to take two other English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses when they are in semesters 4 and 6. The courses are English for Occupational Purposes (BEL300) and English at the Workplace (BEL350). These courses are requisites for graduation and aimed at equipping the students with the necessary skills needed at the workplace. Table 1 summarizes the courses that students have to undergo :

Table 1 : English Language Development Courses for Diploma in Office Management and Technology

COURSE	CODE	SEMESTER	AIM
Preparatory English	BEL100	One	To remedy the students' weaknesses in the use of English Language and also contract the students' foundation on the language.
Mainstream English I	BEL200	Two	To develop the four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking.
Mainstream English II	BEL300	Three	To further enhance the four language skills with the higher difficulty level of materials exercise and tasks.
English for Occupational Purposes	BEL300	Four	To enable students to use English Language in job-related situations so that they can function effectively at the workplace.
English at the Workplace	BEL350	Six	To prepare students with relevant job-related skills so that they can complete tasks competently.

(Source: Course Outline 2001)

THE STUDY

Findings of previous studies have highlighted that knowledge and competency in English were considered as an added advantage for recruitment and career advancement (Jamali et. al. 1988; Azlina Murad Sani 2000; Nurahimah 1994 cited in Kamisah et al. 2004). However, the findings also indicate that entry level graduates did not meet the standard required, particularly by the private sector (Nurahimah 1994, Azlina Murad Sani 2000 cited in Kamisah et al. 2004). Thus, this indicates a little disconnection between the two; a disconnection between what undergraduates learned at the university and what they are expected and required to do at the workplace. Not only they have limited skills of communication skills, they also failed to transfer the skills in different disciplines.

This study aims at finding out the communicative ability of the graduating students in the English Language through a survey analysis on their perceptions on their own ability vis-à-vis the support provided by the University.

The sampling chosen for this study is 30 out of 84 registered students who are either in part 5, 6 or 7 who are actually taking the final semester of the English Language course which is the English for Office Professionals (BEL350). Some of the students are in part 6 and 7 because they have extended their studies. The samples are chosen from a clustered random sampling in which 10 students were chosen from three different groups.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Communicative Ability

Out of the 30 questionnaires distributed, 18 or 60% were returned. In general, these students feel that they are well equipped with the foundation in the English Language Skills. All of them have undergone the three basic compulsory courses mentioned earlier. Each student is to pass with a C on all the three basic courses in order for them to graduate and to proceed to the next level. The following table shows the graduating students' grades obtained for the three courses.

Table 2 : Grades Obtained for the Three Basic English Courses

	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C
BEL100		3	1	5	6	3		
BEL200		3	2	3	7	1	1	1
BEL250			2	4	6	2	4	
Total		6	5	12	19	6	5	1

From the above table, we can see that, most of the graduating students had obtained grades within the B range (B+, B, B-) : 37 or 72.5%; 12 or 22.2% had obtained B+, 19 or 35.2% had obtained B, and 6 or 11.1% had obtained a B-. 11 or 20.4% had obtained either A (6 or 11.1%) or A- (5 or 9.3%). The remaining obtained either C+ (5 or 9.3%) or a C (1 or 1.9%).

Since these students are still taking their English for Office Professionals (BEL350) which is the final course that they have to take in order to graduate, their grades are not available. However, the grades for the English for Occupational Purposes (BEL300) which they had taken earlier are indicated in the table below:

Table 3: Grades Obtained for BEL300

	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C
BEL300		2	1	4	4	6	1	

This again shows that the students are at the average level with the percentage of students obtaining the B range (B+, B, B-) is 14 or and 77.8%. The remaining 4 or 22.2% had obtained other grades with A, 2 or 11.1%, A-, 1 or 5.6% and C+ also 1 or 5.6%.

English Usage

The study also indicates that most of these students seldom used the English Language everyday and felt that they were not so comfortable when using it. 44.4% said that they seldom used the language, 33.3% used it often, 5.6% frequently used it, and 16.7% always used it. In terms of comfortability, 11.2% felt that they were not comfortable at all using the language, 50% felt that they were not so comfortable, 27.8% said that they were quite comfortable and the remaining 11.2% said that they were very comfortable when using the language.

These are illustrated clearly in Figures 1 and 2 :

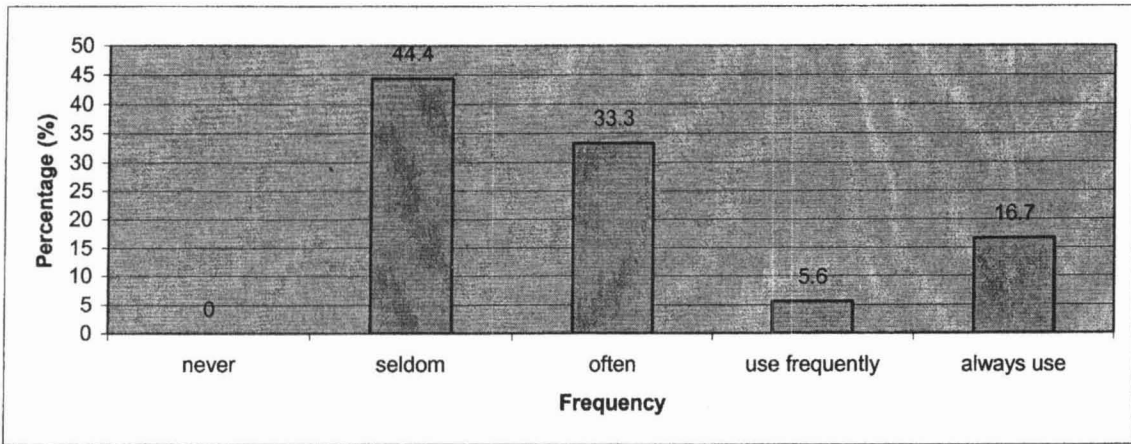


Figure 1: Daily English Language Usage

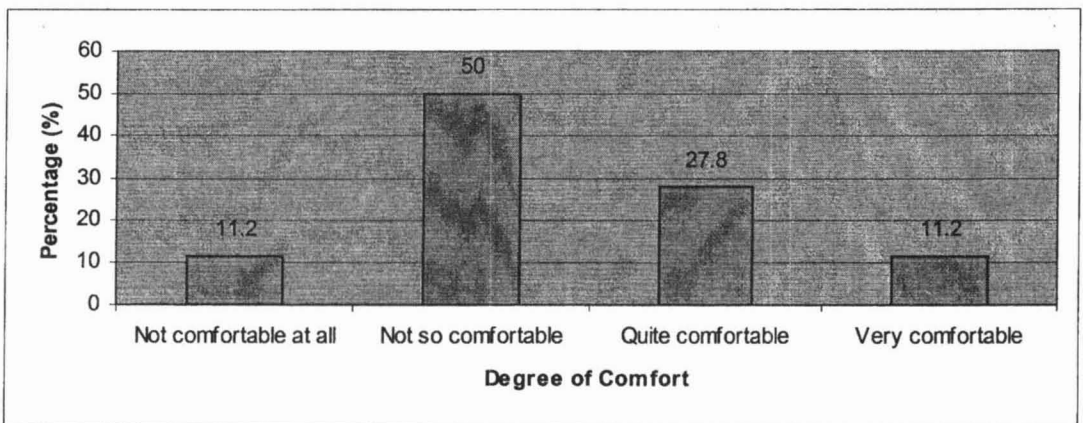


Figure 2: Comfortability of English Language Usage

Most of these students also stated that they did not really encounter problems when communicating in English. 55.6% said that they did not encounter any problems when communicating in English. However, the remaining 44.5% said that they did encounter problems. Inability Among the problems they encounter are problems like not being able to use correct structured English sentences and also lack of confident.

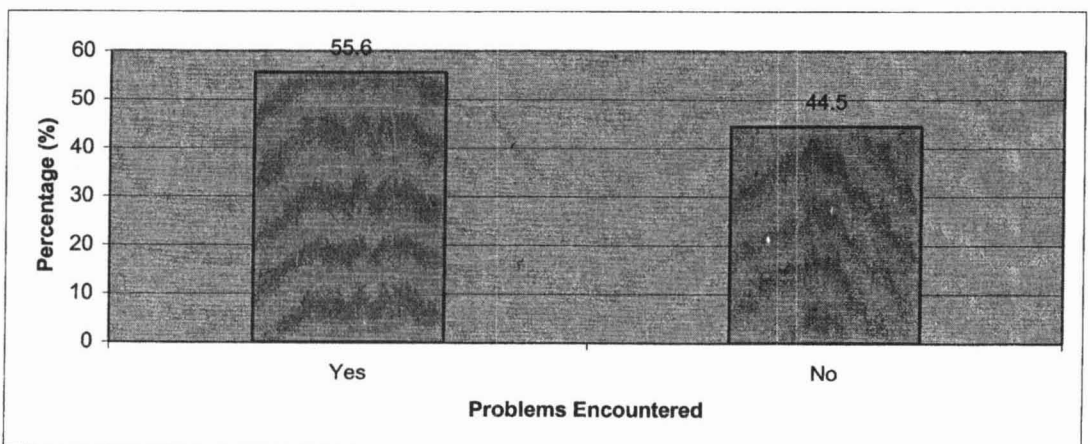


Figure 3: Problems Encountered when Communicating in English Language Students' Perception

Overall, the graduating students felt that they were really prepared and well equipped for the workplace. This can be clearly seen when they were asked whether their English Language skills had improved as compared to when they were first entered the university. 9 or 50.5% said that they had definitely improved as compared to when they first came in, 3 or 16.7% were not so sure by saying that might have improved, while the remaining 6 or 33.4% said that they had only improved a little.

Table 4 : Students' Improvement in the English Language

	Not at all	A little	May be	Yes definitely
Number	0	6	3	9
Percentage (%)	0	33.4	16.7	50.5

When asked where they grade themselves in terms of the English language Communication Skills specifically the speaking skills on the scale of 1-5, the majority or 77.8% said that they were at 3.

Adequacy of Support Provided by UiTM

The support provided by the university can be regarded as adequate. The components provided in the syllabus have actually equipped students for the workplace. This could be seen from the graduating students' positive perception when they were asked whether UiTM has provided them with suitable and sufficient English courses in preparing them for the workplace. Table 5 shows their responses.

Table 5 : Adequacy Support Provided by UiTM

	Not at all	A little	Maybe	Yes definitely
Number	0	2	5	11
Percentage (%)	0%	11.2%	27.8%	61.2%

From the table, we can see that 61.2% said that UiTM has definitely provided them with suitable and sufficient English courses in preparing them for the workplace. 27.8% were not so sure by saying may be it had helped them, while the remaining 11.2% said that UiTM had provided them with only a little preparation for them.

However, in contrast to what they had said earlier, when asked whether the existing English courses that were offered to them should be revised and perhaps upgraded, 88.9% felt that it should be revised and upgraded, and 11.2% said that it should not. When further asked whether they still need extra or additional English courses before they graduate, 72.3% said yes, and 27.8% said no.

Table 6 : Students' perception on the English courses provided

	Yes	No
English Courses should be revised and upgraded	88.9	11.2
Extra or Additional Courses needed	72.3	27.8

The students were further asked on their perception of their ability of using the language before and after they have completed all the English Language Courses offered by the Language Department. In general, most of the respondents claimed that their English Language ability had not really developed considerably throughout their studies in UiTM. The findings show that for the speaking component, only 8 or 44.5 had improved from either poor to mediocre or from mediocre to good. The remaining 10 or 55.6% felt that there was no difference from the first time they entered as compared to once they have completed the courses.

In terms of their listening ability, 8 or 44.5% said that they had improved, while 10 or 55.6% said they had not. As with the Reading component, only 5 or 27.8% improved, while the remaining 13 or 72.3% did not. And for the writing component, the same findings were found in which only 6 or 33.4% had improved, while the other 12 or 66.7% said that there was no improvement.

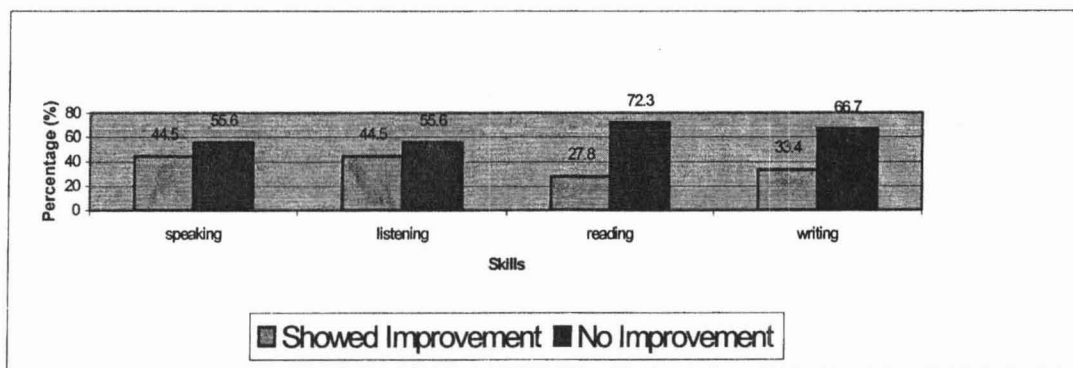


Figure 4: Students' Improvement in the Language Skills

So, what is actually happening? Why is there a contrast in the findings? One of the reasons could be the fact that students or the respondents could not really see that they have learned something throughout their years at UiTM. The study could also indicate that students are not so sure of what they have learned throughout the years. The other possibility could be that the respondents could not really understand the questions and simply answered them for the sake of answering. So, from these findings we can say that there is a little contrast on what Kamisah et al. (2004) had found in her study. According to them, graduates from UiTM think that they have been supported with adequate learning environment.

Looking back at their grades when they took BEL100, compared to their grades when they took BEL300, it somehow proves that most of the students show no improvement in their English language ability. 8 or 44.5% shows no improvement, 3 or 16.7% shows an improvement while the remaining 6 or 33.4% shows a decrease in their grades. However, this cannot be taken seriously without considering other factors like the level of difficulty to the different level of courses offered to them. So, it can be said that the syllabus have not helped the students so much in preparing them for the workplace.

Having looked at the present situation of the students, it can be concluded that students do not really have the communicative ability yet and their perception towards the existing support service provided are also insufficient and inadequate in preparing them for the workplace. So, this proves what most studies have said on the inability of students to communicate well once they go out to the workplace. Stevens (2004), for example, found that employers in the Silicon Valley are not fully satisfied with the business communication skills that the newly hired graduates have. He further indicates that these graduates need stronger communication skills.

SUMMARY

On the whole, these graduating students feel that they are not really prepared and ready to go out to the workplace with the English Language ability that they presently have. They feel that they need more input in order for them to be accepted in the working world. They are not comfortable using the language and feel that part of it is because they lack confident. The students also perceived that they have not improved in anyway throughout their studies at UiTM and this is somehow proven by the grades that they obtained.

The study looked at the support provided in terms of syllabus provided by the university, and it shows that even though the university thinks that it has provided adequate and sufficient support, the students think differently. They feel that the support provided has not been helpful enough in which most students feel that they have not learned much and, therefore, showed no improvement in their competency. In fact, they still feel they need extra English courses just before they graduate, especially in the field of communication.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that students should pay close attention to English Language, in which, they should view English as a complementing entity, not as a separate entity to their core subjects. The students' communicative ability should be developed both by the English lecturers and the content lecturers. The content lecturers should also help in developing their skills by developing language competence relevant to their field. For example, the content lecturer of engineering could help students to be more familiarized with a range of text such as graphs, tables and maps or newspaper report. In doing so, students would be able to apply the skills learned in different contexts.

In addition, with the existing industrial linkage that the university currently has, students could use the opportunity to explore their capability in the real world when they go for their industrial training. From there, the university could analyze and take into considerations the current needs, requirements, and expectations of the industry in order to design courses and to include content that would prepare students better for their future employment

The other recommendation would be based on the existing courses that students have to undergo. The researchers feel that the courses offered especially the three courses : BEL100, BEL200 and BEL250 are too examination oriented. ESP courses should be introduced earlier so as they are more prepared for the workplace.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, looking at the current needs at the workplace, we can say that English is everything nowadays. With English one can go far. Graduates compete with each other in the job market, not so much in terms of their qualifications but in terms of their ability to communicate in English.

From the study, we can see that students do not have the confidence and do not feel comfortable using the English Language due to the fact that they do not use the language much and, therefore, feel not fully prepared to go out to the workplace.

Thus, it is the university's task to prepare and equip students with the competency needed. The task of the university in preparing students for the workplace is vital. A closer look at the content of the syllabus should be done in order for UiTM graduates to compete with the rest, because students feel that the English courses that are offered to them should be revised and upgraded, even though at one point students do feel that UiTM has provided them with suitable and sufficient English Language courses. This indeed contradicts. Thus, the researchers feel that perhaps students are not so sure of themselves of what they want and what is offered to them.

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