

The Use of English by Malaysian Business Executives in the Commercial Sector

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ABSTRAK

Kajian ini adalah sebahagian daripada kajian yang luas tentang isu penting dan penataran penggunaan bahasa Inggeris dalam ekonomi Malaysia. Walaupun bahasa Inggeris sering diperkatakan sebagai bahasa yang penting, tetapi kajian yang mendalam tidak diusahakan untuk menyokong dan memberi huraian tentang situasi ini. Kajian yang dijalankan ini merampilkkan maklumat berdasarkan tanggapan eksekutif perniagaan yang menggunakan bahasa Inggeris dalam dunia pekerjaan mereka. Data yang diperolehi mempermantap hakikat pentingnya penggunaan bahasa Inggeris di tempat kerja komersial. Secara am, eksekutif perniagaan menunjukkan keyakinan dalam penggunaan bahasa Inggeris. Ini bermakna bahawa bakal pekerja-pekerja mestilah juga mempunyai penguasaan bahasa Inggeris untuk diterima masuk ke dalam pasaran dalam sektor komersial. Kekerapan sub kemahiran bahasa yang tertinggi yang digunakan ialah: kemahiran mendengar perbualan sosial dalam perniagaan, kemahiran bertutur yang melibatkan penggunaan telefon, membaca dan menulis surat dan memo perniagaan yang lazim. Dari segi urutan kepentingan, kemahiran bertutur menduduki tangga teratas. Kepentingan kemahiran bertutur yang ditunjukkan dalam kajian ini membuktikan bahawa kejayaan dalam profesional mempunyai kaitan yang rapat dengan keupayaan bertutur dengan baik. Matlumat ini mempunyai implikasi yang mendalam kepada program pendidikan dan latihan.

ABSTRACT

This study is part of a larger survey on the issue of the importance and extent of the use of the English language in the Malaysian economy. While the use of English has often been said to be important, large-scale studies to support and to provide details about the situation are lacking. This present study presents information from the perspective of business executives who use the English language in their jobs. The data obtained confirm the importance of the use of the English language in the commercial work-place. The business executives claim to have confidence in the use of the language. Thus potential employees must also achieve a level of proficiency that would enable them to use the language confidently and efficiently. The most frequent language sub-skills used are: listening to social conversations in business, speaking on the telephone, reading and writing routine letters and memos. In terms of order of importance, speaking was ranked the highest. This attachment of importance to speaking suggests that job success is very much related to the ability to speak well. This information would have deep implications for education and training programmes.

INTRODUCTION

This study complements an earlier study carried out by the researchers on the importance and extent of the use of English in the commercial sector of the Malaysian economy (Goh and Chan 1993). In the earlier study, the focus was on 197 companies and

158 undergraduates from the Faculty of Economics and Management, UPM who did their practical training in these companies. These companies, therefore, represented potential employers in the commercial sector and the undergraduates, potential employees. It was felt that another survey was needed on

the use of English by business executives currently employed by those companies. It was deemed important to investigate the target situation so as to obtain the necessary information to validate the data on language use of the potential employees. This information would indicate firmly the target requirements and facilitate efforts to prepare the learning of the appropriate dimensions in language use in business situations (Adams-Smith 1986).

Thus, this study provides the link and bridges the gap of prediction and actualization in the tripartite connection of potential employers, potential employees and actual employees in the various commercial enterprises. This survey was funded by Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM) and assisted by the British Council Language Centre, Kuala Lumpur.

METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire survey method was used to obtain the data for the study. Questionnaires were mailed to 197 companies throughout Malaysia (see Appendices A and B). These companies, which were the practical training centres for UPM undergraduates from the Faculty of Economics and Management, were requested to return one or more copies of the questionnaire received. The questionnaires were filled in by business executives in the companies and a total of 187 copies were collected. The data yielded information on the use and need for on-job skills of the business executives in the English language. The data contribute to the field of research in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) where needs analysis forms a crucial approach for the collection of information (Robinson 1991) and provides guidelines for ESP syllabus design (Riddell 1993).

An attempt was made to classify the nature of the business carried out by the companies in order to have a clearer picture of the extent of the industries covered. Five pre-determined categories were used: manufacturing; trading, shipping and distribution; services and construction; finance; and others.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Background Information

It was found that the nature of business of the companies was very varied with the largest number falling under the 'others' category. In this category, the nature of the companies' business was found to include public accounting, auditing, plantations, market research, co-operatives and telecommunication. Thus the population was not very clearly involved in the pre-defined categories of finance, manufacturing, shipping and distribution. Table 1 shows the classification.

TABLE 1
Nature of the companies' business

| Business | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| Manufacturing | 7.0 |
| Trading, shipping and distribution | 7.0 |
| Services and construction | 29.4 |
| Finance | 7.0 |
| Others | 49.1 |

Responses to the Use of English

The business executives confirmed their employers' expectation of the importance of English in their work. The figure of 98.9% who said that they believed it was important to know English was similar to the 97.1% of employers who said likewise in the 1991 study (Goh and Chan 1993).

A large percentage of the respondents (73.8%) reported that English is essential to their job, confirming the findings of the 1991 study, where a large percentage of the employers (69.3%) felt that it was essential for their employees to know English.

A question on whether the business executives had attended English language courses was used as a gauge to indicate the desire to improve or to show continued interest in the use of the language. Only 12.3% replied in the affirmative, and of this figure, 65% said they had to pay for their courses themselves. Twenty-six per cent reported that they were sponsored by their company. This reaffirms the low figure in the 1991 study which found that 18.2% of the

companies had sponsored English courses. Thus employees wishing to pursue any further learning of English must still do so at their own initiative.

Time Spent on the Use of English

The respondents were asked to indicate the number of working hours per week they spent on the use of each of the four English skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. From the data collected, three categories were used to group the data. The first was 0 hour, the second was 1-5 hours and the third was 6-9 hours. In interpreting the data, the highest percentage of responses in the 0-hour category would indicate the least used sub-skill. Most of the responses were accounted for in the second category (1-5 hours). The frequency of use diminished noticeably after five hours. The responses were as follows:

Listening

The least used sub-skill was listening to an oral presentation in business from the electronic media (3.7%), as in the previous study. The most used sub-skill in the 1-5 hour category in the present study was listening to a social conversation in business (78.7%). This suggests that social English plays an important role in the work-place. This conclusion is further strengthened by the high figure (77.1%) recorded for telephone conversations about social matters (Table 2).

TABLE 2
Listening in English

| Sub-skill | Hours (%) | | |
|---|-----------|------|------|
| | 0 | 1-5 | 6-9 |
| Listening to a social conversation in business | 12.8 | 78.7 | 28.5 |
| Listening to a business discussion | 20.9 | 66.8 | 12.2 |
| Listening to a telephone conversation about social matters | 17.6 | 77.1 | 4.8 |
| Listening to an oral presentation on business from the electronic media | 37.4 | 58.8 | 3.7 |

Speaking

The least used sub-skill in speaking (Table 3) was giving an oral presentation in business (40.1%) while the most used sub-skill in the 1-5 hour category was speaking on the telephone about technical or specialized topics related to the job (75.9%). A similar trend was observed in the previous study. From the data, it appears that the telephone is frequently used in specific job situations. It therefore suggests that in the learning of oral English, telephone skills should be emphasized. Speaking in social situations was observed to be also an important sub-skill as more than 70% reported that it was used in the 1-5 hour category. This was further reinforced by the highest percentage of responses (12.3%) in the 6-9 hour category.

TABLE 3
Speaking in English

| Sub-skill | Hours (%) | | |
|--|-----------|------|------|
| | 0 | 1-5 | 6-9 |
| Speaking in social situations in business | 16.0 | 71.7 | 12.3 |
| Giving an oral presentation in business | 40.1 | 58.3 | 1.6 |
| Speaking on the telephone about technical or specialized topics related to the job | 15.5 | 75.9 | 8.5 |
| Speaking to business associates/clients in business meetings | 18.2 | 75.5 | 6.3 |

Reading

Reading job-related materials in order to inform/instruct co-workers was found to be the least used sub-skill (Table 4). The previous study, which involved undergraduates, also reported this as the least needed skill. Unlike the previous study which found reading business reports was the most practised skill, this study revealed that reading routine business letters was the most used skill for the business executives (1-5 hour category). Thus on-job requirements appear to stress this sub-skill of reading.

TABLE 4
Reading in English

| Sub-skill | Hours (%) | | |
|--|-----------|------|-----|
| | 0 | 1-5 | 6-9 |
| Reading routine business letters and memos | 12.3 | 78.1 | 9.6 |
| Reading business reports | 18.7 | 76.7 | 3.7 |
| Reading technical or specialized materials related to the job | 19.8 | 73.7 | 6.4 |
| Reading job-related materials in order to inform/instruct co-workers | 26.2 | 71.7 | 2.1 |

Writing

In view of our bilingual situation, a question was asked about the need to translate written business documents from English into Malay. This was found to be not very necessary. Writing routine business letters and memos was found to be a regular task for the business executives. This can be seen not only in the highest percentage found in the 1-5 hour category but also in the 6-9 hour category. Writing business reports was the second most frequently used sub-skill in the 1-5 hour category. Writing was generally was a lesser practised skill than reading.

TABLE 5
Writing in English

| Sub-skill | Hours (%) | | |
|--|-----------|------|------|
| | 0 | 1-5 | 6-9 |
| Writing routine letters and memos | 21.9 | 66.8 | 11.2 |
| Writing business reports | 33.7 | 60.9 | 5.3 |
| Translation of other languages (e.g. Malay) into English | 51.9 | 48.0 | 0 |
| Writing about technical or specialized topics related to the job | 41.7 | 52.4 | 5.9 |

Order of Importance of English Language Skills

Speaking was found to be the most important skill (Table 6). This skill was also deemed to be the most important in the study which investigated the perceptions of undergraduates and employers. Therefore, the present study confirms the importance placed on speaking skills. In all three sample groups of respondents (employers, undergraduates, and business executives) writing was rated as the second most important skill. Reading and listening were ranked as third and fourth by the business executives in the present study as well as by the employers in the previous study. However, the undergraduates (potential employees) rated listening as more important than reading. This could be a result of the undergraduates seeing themselves as 'apprentices' in their practical training stint in which they probably took on a more passive role and practised listening skills to derive the maximum benefit from their situation.

TABLE 6
Order of importance of English language skills

| Order | Skill | Rank | Percentage |
|-------|-----------|------|------------|
| 1 | Speaking | 1 | 26.3 |
| 2 | Writing | 1 | 17.5 |
| 3 | Reading | 1 | 6.6 |
| 4 | Listening | 1 | 5.1 |

Rating of English Proficiency

To assess the level of English proficiency achieved by the business executives, they were asked to carry out a self-rating exercise. About a third of them stated that they were good or average in the language. Only 12.3% rated themselves as excellent. Very few considered themselves as being poor in the language. One can infer that business executives need to possess a reasonably good command of the language in order to be hired. The 'fair - good' band in fact encompasses 87.7% of the responses. Potential employees in the first study admitted their lack of confidence in the use of the language and noted that if they were to aspire to be business executives, they must achieve an adequate level of English proficiency in order

to meet on-job demands.

It was also noted in the first study that English proficiency was an important consideration in job interviews and promotion exercises for business executives. The importance of English as an entry requirement as well as for further career advancement for business executives is clearly supported.

CONCLUSION

Both studies involving the same 197 companies confirmed the importance of English as a job requirement for business executives. As for how much time is spent on the use of English in their work life per week, it was revealed that the range of one to five hours encompasses the highest concentration of the percentage of responses.

Research related to ESP invariably leads to pedagogical implications (Swales 1990). From the evidence given by this study, it is suggested that course design in business English should give attention to listening and speaking on the telephone about technical and social matters. Reading and writing routine business letters and memos are definitely other important aspects that need to be taught in business English courses. Students must be prepared adequately in the use of the English language to meet the challenges of their intended career in the

business world. The need is all the more cogent with the English language widely acclaimed as the international language used in science, technology and trade dealings (Johns and Dudley-Evans 1991).

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APPENDIX A

Table A
Distribution of accounting companies according to state/town

| No. | State | Town |
|-----|-------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. | Federal Territory | Kuala Lumpur |
| 2. | Johor | Muar, Johor Baru |
| 3. | Kedah | Alor Setar |
| 4. | Kelantan | Kota Bharu |
| 5. | Melaka | Melaka |
| 6. | Negri Sembilan | Seremban |
| 7. | Pahang | Kuantan |
| 8. | Pulau Pinang | Butterworth, Pulau Pinang |
| 9. | Perak | Ipoh |
| 10. | Perlis | — |
| 11. | Sabah | Kota Kinabalu |
| 12. | Sarawak | Kuching, Sibul |
| 13. | Selangor | Kelang, Petaling Jaya, Tanjung Karang |
| 14. | Terengganu | Kuala Terengganu, Marang |

APPENDIX B

Table B
Distribution of "other" companies according to state/town

| No. | State | Town |
|-----|-------------------|---|
| 1. | Federal Territory | Kuala Lumpur |
| 2. | Johor | Batu Pahat, Bruas, Johor Baru, Kluang, Muar, Pontian, Segamat, Senai |
| 3. | Kedah | Alor Setar, Baling, Jitra, Kota Setar, Kulim, Langkawi, Pendang, Sungai Petani |
| 4. | Kelantan | Bachok, Kota Bharu, Machang, Pasir Mas, Pasir Puteh, Tanah Merah |
| 5. | Melaka | Melaka |
| 6. | Negeri Sembilan | Johol, Port Dickson, Seremban, Tampin |
| 7. | Pahang | Benta, Bentong, Genting Highlands, Jerantut, Kuantan, Pekan, Temerloh |
| 8. | Pulau Pinang | Bukit Mertajam, Butterworth, Pulau Pinang |
| 9. | Perak | Hutan Melintang, Ipoh, Kuala Kangsar, Langkap, Lenggeng, Selama, Slim Village, Sungai Teluk Intan, Taiping, Tapah |
| 10. | Perlis | Kangar |
| 11. | Sabah | - |
| 12. | Sarawak | Bintulu, Kuching |
| 13. | Selangor | Banting, Kajang, Kelang, Petaling Jaya, Semenyih, Sepang, Shah Alam |
| 14. | Terengganu | Dungun, Jerteh, Kuala Terengganu, Kemaman, Kuala Berang, Marang |

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