

Needs Assessment of Workplace English and Malaysian Graduates' English Language Competency

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Abstract: Communication skills in English have been identified as essential workplace tools for success in business and have been correlated with career success and increased in financial rewards. Not with standing, there is a global concern regarding the widening gap between the communication skills in English of job applicants and the English language competency required for employment. This paper presents the findings of a study to investigate the importance of English competency for employment and employers' needs for an English competency certification test. Data for the study were gathered from 295 companies representing 14 industry sectors using a 14-item survey questionnaire, focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study indicate that English was the most important language for employment; English competency was assessed in the recruitment process by all industry sectors; and employers provided in-house training programs to enhance employees' English language competency. It was also found that employers advocated the need for a valid, reliable, globally benchmarked and industry-driven English competency certification test for non-native speakers of English. The paper concludes that due to the competitiveness of the market environment, the test would provide the impetus for institutions of higher learning to adequately prepare graduates with employability skills associated with communication skills in English for the workplace.

Key words: English language competency test • Employability skills • Malaysian graduates
• Communication skills

INTRODUCTION

In the new landscape of global employment, most business organizations require employees to possess not only industry-specific technical knowledge but also employability skills. Employability skills are attributes other than industry-specific technical knowledge which contribute to effective and successful participation in the workplace. The attributes of employability skills vary from 25 skills in 6 categories to 76 skills in 9 categories [1-4]. Some of the employability skills employers look for are communication, critical and problem solving, interpersonal, leadership, team work and honesty, dependability and adaptability skills.

The literature on employability and job qualification of college graduates seems to indicate that there seems to be a growing number of graduates who are ill-equipped to face the complex challenges of employment in the job market due to lack of employability skills [5, 1]. [6], in examining graduate employment issues points out that employers are concerned by the lack of employability skills exhibited by job applicants. [7] advocate that in order to produce workers with relevant employability skills, the industry needs to turn to higher education for assistance. [6] accentuates that employers consider it the responsibility of educational institutions to develop graduates' employability skills. In order to develop a curriculum that prepares graduates for the labor market,

higher education institutions need to be cognizant of the needs of the industry. One of the academic programs in higher education institutions that contribute to the development of students' employability skills is the English language program. A brief review of literature indicates that most of the studies on employability focus more on skills such as critical, problem solving, leadership and teamwork rather than communication skills in English [1-4]. Due to the importance of communication skills in English at the workplace, it is crucial that higher education institutions examine the needs of the industry for graduates who are proficient in English. Thus, the main objective of this study was to investigate the importance for graduates' English language competency for employment purposes. The secondary objective was to examine the need of the industry for an English competency certification test.

Literature Review: Communication skills in English, particularly in English speaking organizations and settings, have been identified as indispensable workplace tools for success in business [8]. More importantly, communication skills in English play an even more significant role as technology increases the speed of efficacy of messages. Business communication studies have cited the numerous hours managers spend communicating with others [9], the time managers devote to writing correspondence and reports [10] and their ability to earn higher salaries if they have strong writing skills [11]. These abilities have been correlated with career success and increased financial rewards [12, 13]. The value of strong business communication skills in English is clearly documented in these and other studies.

Due to the importance of English as the language of business and technology in the region, countries such as Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Malaysia have been very concerned with the deteriorating standards of English and have taken proactive measures to enhance the standards of English of the population [14-18].

In the Malaysian context, the issue of unemployable graduates surfaced in 2005 following a survey report appearing in *Malaysian Business* that about 60,000 graduates were unemployed [19]. The findings necessitated employers to urge institutions of higher learning to relook at their academic programmes in order to produce graduates who have the communication skills to meet the demand of the job market and to compete in

the international arena [2, 1, 5]. In a survey conducted on 3,300 senior human resource personnel, the main reason for the high rate of unemployable graduates was their "weak English proficiency" [20]. Even though pro-active measures have been undertaken by companies, institutions of higher learning and even federal governments, employers continue to draw attention to the widening gap between the English competency of job applicants and the English language competency required for employment [21, 22].

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The findings of the study were derived from a mixed-method research design comprising a series of semi-structured interviews, a survey and a focus group discussion. A total of 9 senior human resource personnel from nine different industry sectors participated in a focus group discussion, while semi-structured interviews were conducted to 6 senior managers. A 14-item questionnaire related to English at the workplace was formulated based on review of the literature and findings of the focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews. Each item was a 5-point Likert item from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Of the 300 employers approached, 295 returned the questionnaire, constituting a response rate of 98%. The alpha coefficient for the 14 items was 0.76, suggesting that the items have relatively good internal consistency.

The employers represented 14 different industry sectors based on the Global Intelligence Alliance (GIA) classification [23]. The industry sectors were automotive; chemicals, construction and property development; consumer and retail; energy, resources and environment; financial services; leisure and travel; logistics and transportation; manufacturing and industrial; market research and consulting; telecommunication, technology and media; pharmaceuticals and healthcare; public services; and training and education (Table 1).

The job designation of the respondents ranged from Chief Executive Officers and General Managers to Directors, Executives and Officers (Table 2). Managers made up the majority of the respondents (38.5%), followed by officers (17.9%) and executives (12%). The job designation was based on the exact information stated by the respondents in the survey questionnaire. Of the 295 respondents, 195 (66%) were males and 100 (44%) were females.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by industry sector

| | Industry Sectors | N | % |
|----|--|-----|-------|
| 1 | Manufacturing and Industrial | 57 | 19.3% |
| 2 | Financial Services | 35 | 11.9% |
| 3 | Pharmaceuticals and Healthcare | 31 | 10.5% |
| 4 | Telecommunications, Technology and Media | 31 | 10.5% |
| 5 | Constructions and Property Development | 24 | 8.1% |
| 6 | Consumer and Retail | 23 | 7.8% |
| 7 | Training and Education | 22 | 7.5% |
| 8 | Public Services | 17 | 5.8% |
| 9 | Market Research and Consulting | 13 | 4.4% |
| 10 | Energy, Resources and Development | 13 | 4.4% |
| 11 | Automotive | 11 | 3.7% |
| 12 | Chemicals | 7 | 2.4% |
| 13 | Leisure and Travel | 8 | 2.7% |
| 14 | Logistics and Transportation | 3 | 1.0% |
| | Total | 295 | 100 |

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Job Designation

| | Job Designation | N | % |
|---|---|-----|------|
| 1 | Manager | 112 | 38.5 |
| 2 | Officer | 52 | 17.9 |
| 3 | Executive | 35 | 12.0 |
| 4 | Assistant Manager | 27 | 9.3 |
| 5 | Head | 24 | 8.2 |
| 6 | Director/Executive Director | 16 | 5.5 |
| 7 | General Manager | 15 | 5.2 |
| 8 | CEO/Deputy CEO/President/Vice-President | 10 | 3.4 |
| 9 | Job designation not indicated | 4 | 1.4 |
| | TOTAL | 295 | 100 |

RESULTS

A total of 295 respondents from fourteen industry sectors were asked to respond to five dimensions consisting of fourteen items related to English at the workplace. The five dimensions were the importance of English language proficiency at the workplace (items 1,2,3 and 4), employees preparedness to perform work in English (items 5 and 6), assessment of English competency in the in recruitment process (items 7,8 and 9), employers' English language training (items 10 and 11) and English competency certification test (items 12, 13 and 14) The results, based on the five-point Likert scale were collapsed (strongly agree/agree and strongly disagree/disagree) to indicate agreement or disagreement. The results are presented in Table 3.

The Importance of English Language Competency at the Workplace: Overall, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (96.5%) indicated their agreement of the

importance of English language competency at the workplace, the importance of English over other languages (99.7%) and the importance of English against employees' core knowledge and skills associated with their bachelor degree (80%).

It was also found that 67% of the respondents regarded Reading as an important English language skill, followed by Speaking(64%), Writing (63%) and Listening (63%).

Employees Preparedness to Perform Work Inenglish:

In general, 75.3% of the respondents stated that new employees were prepared to perform work in English, while 53.7% agreed that they would hire candidates even though they did not meet the minimum English proficiency required by the organization

Assessment of English Competency in the Recruitment

Process: An overwhelming majority of the respondents (93%) indicated their agreement that English competency was assessed in the recruitment process. The English language skills assessed were Speaking (97.9%), Listening (76.9%), Writing (63.1%), Pronunciation (56.9%), Reading (54.9%), Grammar (49.8%), Vocabulary (49%) and Spelling (40%).

Types of Tasks Performed in the Interview Process:

The respondents were asked to indicate the types of tasks that they would have candidates performed in the recruitment process as part of the mechanism to assess the candidates' English language skills. It was found that tasks that were typical required the recruitment process were essay writing (35.5%) face to face interview (26.1%), followed by prompts/tasks (14.1%), impromptu speeches (12.5%) and oral presentations (10.3%).

English Language Training to Enhance Employees'

English Language Competency: On the whole, 49.5% of the respondents reported that their organizations provided in-house training programs to enhance employees' English language proficiency. It was also found that 57.2% of the respondents were willing to send newly recruited staff for English language training conducted by a third party to enhance their English competency.

English Competency Certification Test: A total of 77.3% of the respondents indicated their agreement of the importance of having an English competency certification test to certify graduates' level of English proficiency for

Table 3: Industry sector's perception of graduates' English language competency

| | | Strongly Agree/ Agree |
|-----|---|--------------------------|
| 1 | Competency in English is important in the organization | 96.5 |
| 2 | English is more important than other languages in the organization. | 99.7 |
| 3 | Competency in English is equally or more important than academic knowledge and skills associated with the bachelor degree | 80.0 |
| 4 | The following English language skills are important in the organization | |
| | 4.1Reading | 67.0 |
| | 4.2Speaking | 64.0 |
| | 4.3Listening | 63.0 |
| | 4.4Writing | 63.0 |
| 5 | Newly recruited employees are prepared to perform work in English | 75.3 |
| 6 | Candidates are employed without the minimum English competency required by the organization | 53.7 |
| 7 | Candidates' English language competency are assessed in the recruitment process | 93.0 |
| 8. | The following English language skills are assessed in the recruitment process | |
| | 8.1Speaking | 97.9 |
| | 8.2Listening | 76.9 |
| | 8.3Writing | 63.1 |
| | 8.4Pronunciation | 56.9 |
| | 8.5Reading | 54.9 |
| | 8.6Grammar | 49.8 |
| | 8.7Vocabulary | 49.0 |
| | 8.8Spelling | 40.0 |
| 9 | The following methods are used to assess candidates' English competency in the recruitment process: | |
| | 9.1Written essay | 35.3 |
| | 9.2Face-to-face interview | 26.1 |
| | 9.3Prompts/Tasks | 14.1 |
| | 9.4Impromptu speech | 12.5 |
| | 9.5Oral presentation | 10.3 |
| | 9.6Response to questions | 1.1 |
| 10. | In-house English language training is provided in the organization | 49.5 |
| 11. | Employees are sent to attend English language training outside the organization | 57.2 |
| 12. | It is important to develop an English competency certification test for employment purposes. | 77.3 |
| 13 | Candidates should be required to sit for the English competency certification test. | 83.7 |
| 14 | Universities should do more to prepare graduates for communication in English to function effectively at the workplace | 94.5 |

employment purposes. Furthermore, 83.7% asserted that they would require graduates to sit for the test. In view of the importance of English at the workplace, the respondents also articulated (94.5) that institution of higher learnings should have done more to prepare graduates for communication in English to function effectively at the workplace.

DISCUSSION

The objectives of the study were to investigate the importance of English language competency for occupational purposes and to examine the need of the industry for an English competency certification test. Four key areas have been identified based on the findings of the study. Firstly, English is an indispensable language in Malaysia. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (96.5%) corroborated the importance of English in the job market, while 99.2% affirmed that

English was the most important language in their organizations, more important than Bahasa Melayu, which is the official language of communication and instruction in Malaysia. Furthermore, almost 80% of the employers indicated that English language proficiency was equally or more important than employees' core knowledge and skills associated with their bachelor degree. These findings are supported by [24, 25, 26, 18].

The findings from the interviews and focus group discussion revealed that the industry sectors felt that English language was a necessary criterion for recruitment considering that communication at the workplace required a lot of English. Malaysian employers' articulation of the importance of English was also demonstrated in the recruitment process, where almost all Malaysian employers (93%) reported assessing the English language proficiency of job applicants in their recruitment process. Based on the focus group discussion, the respondents articulated that of 10

shortlisted candidates only 2 were considered to meet the English language requirements of the organization. This is supported by a study conducted by McKinsey and Company that only 13% of graduates from emerging countries were suitable for employment in global companies [25]. The main reason found was lack of English skills. The findings provide the empirical evidence to support the assertion of Malaysian employers that Malaysian university graduates were unprepared to use English for employment and that there was a gap between the actual English language proficiency of graduates and the English language requirements of the industry [1, 2, 9, 10, 18].

Even though the findings indicated that less than 20% of shortlisted graduates were perceived as having attained the minimum English competency required by the industry, it is intriguing to discover that more than half of the respondents (53.7%) in this study remarked that they would hire candidates who did not meet the minimum English proficiency stipulated by the organization. One plausible explanation for this discrepant situation may be that in the absence of candidates who fulfilled all or most of the stipulated industry requirements, the obvious choice would be to select those who fulfilled some of the requirements; in other words, moderately proficient candidates.

The second key area concerns the importance of the productive skills (speaking and writing) over receptive skills (listening and reading). Although the findings indicated that all language skills were important for employment purposes, only speaking and writing skills were directly assessed in the recruitment process. The finding of the survey revealed that all respondents (100%) evaluated the English competency of graduates based on essay writing, face-to-face interviews, written and spoken prompts or given tasks, impromptu speeches, oral presentations and debates.

In the interviews and focused group discussion, participants were asked on why performances in productive language skills were given emphasis in the recruitment process. It was found that job applicants' speaking and writing skills provided access to their critical thinking abilities. For instance, the vice president in the financial services sector pointed out that critical thinking and problem solving skills were assessed using tasks that required candidates to respond in English, "writing a short essay on [a] general topic is sufficient ... [and a] 50 or 100-word essay [is adequate to] measure their thinking process." A manager in the market research and

consulting sector, concurred that in emphasizing the need for employers to assess the critical thinking ability of potential employees, "the candidate must be able to share [with the interviewers] what is inside his brain [mind]." The finding is supported by [18, 25] that the majority of job applicants were unable to take an active role in business discussions such as through global conference calls or perform multifaceted tasks such as presentation development and customer or partner negotiations.

The third key area focuses on the function of English language training programs to enhance employees' English language proficiency. The unquestionable importance of English at the workplace was noticeably stressed by Malaysian employers whereby almost half (49.5%) reported that they provided English language training for their employees, while 57.2% were willing to send newly recruited staff for training by a third party to enhance their English competency. This is a relevant finding in view of the fact that establishing a training program involves a considerable business investment. More often than not, employers without their own training programs would normally send their employees to undertake English language training conducted by a third party. It is interesting to note that organizations that provided in-house training programs were more likely to send their newly recruited staff for training than those without any in-house training program. Findings of the interviews and focus group discussion and supported by [25] revealed that organizations with in-house training programs valued the contribution of the English language training program in advancing the quality of their workforce.

The fourth key area relates to the industry's need for an English certification test for employment purposes. More than two-third (77.3%) of the industry representatives surveyed supported the notion of developing an English certification test to verify graduates' level of proficiency for the purpose of employment. This finding is hardly surprising on the account that 80% of the employers had remarked that proficiency in English was more or equally important than the core academic knowledge and skills associated with the bachelor degree. Additionally, only 20% of Malaysian university graduates were considered to have met the minimum English competency required by the industry. To a certain extent, it is an important finding that a majority of the industry representatives (83.7%) affirmed that they would require Malaysian university

graduates to sit for the English certification test. This pattern of response may be considered as a clear indication of the pressing demand among Malaysian employers for a reliable English certification test.

The concern with the unreliability of existing language assessments in the likes of SPM (standardized pre-university national examination) MUET (Malaysian University English Test) and university language courses in accurately reflecting graduates' English competency was rather pronounced among employers. Some employers reported being compelled to develop their own in-house workplace assessment, even though they lacked the expertise, simply because the available English assessment results based on SPM or MUET were deemed unreliable. Employers who did not have their own in-house assessment instrument generally resorted to appraising graduates' competency in English based on their impromptu judgment derived from face-to-face interviews. In the focus group discussion, industry representatives expressed their reservation in terms of creating yet another compulsory national-level test in addition to the existing Malaysian University English Test (MUET). One representative equated the idea to "creating another layer of national-level assessment," which many may find undesirable or redundant. Almost all participants in both the interviews and focus group discussion questioned the credibility of English certification test results, where the main concern lies in whether the results would be valid and reliable. This was expressed quite lucidly by a representative from the financial services sector:

"... [One] issue of [developing a] test is [the issue of] validity and ... reliability ... [The test] must measure what it is supposed to measure and, secondly, it must continuously give us the same result."

Another representative from the education sector expressed the same reservation about the ability of existing tests to truly reflect the ability of candidates, especially if the tests were yet to be established in terms of their reliability and validity:

"The (English) tests we have now do not reflect the true ability of candidates. It's ok if the test truly reflects the ability of the candidate."

The issues raised regarding the reliability and validity of the test to be developed are genuine and legitimate as they affect the interpretation and usability of the test scores; hence, they must be addressed thoroughly (in consultation with psychometricians and assessment experts) before the actual development of the test takes place.

CONCLUSION

Employers are confronted with a new landscape of employment that emphasizes the use of English at the workplace beyond face-to-face communication. Due to the competitiveness and volatility of current market environments both at the national and global levels, employers cannot afford to let the issue of English competency jeopardize the core of their business intelligence. It is timely that a valid and reliable test be developed to assess graduates' English language competency for employment purposes. Since correct and timely decisions are important in the industry, data based on the performance in the English competency certification test will allow employers to match candidates that best suit the job profile methodically, accurately and swiftly. With a globally benchmarked, industry-driven and standardized English competency certification test for non-native speakers of English for employment purposes, employers are almost certain to get job applicants with the English competency that meet their needs. Ultimately, it would compel institutions of higher learning to design their curricular and job applicants to equip themselves with the necessary English language skills to meet the demand for the 21st century employment.

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