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Perceptions of Support Staffs on English Usage at the Workplace

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Perceptions of Support Staffs on English Usage at the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Much has been said that universities in Malaysia have to increase the intake of foreign students. One of the purposes is to rank Malaysian universities among the top World Class Universities. Due to this, there is a growing concern of the use of English language at the public universities especially among the support staff. Hence, this study was conducted to find out the perceptions of the support staff at the Malaysian public universities at the Northern Region regarding English usage by examining the workers' needs and actual use of language at the workplace, the workers' wants, and the workers' lacks in English language. It was found that English is not necessary for the support staff in performing their duties. However, English is more needed for personal usage. It is hope that the findings of this study will provide insights to employers to better manage the workplace literacy particularly when English is concern.

Keywords: Workplace literacy, workers' needs, workers' wants, workers' lacks.

INTRODUCTION

In America, New Zealand, and Canada, workplace literacy is not a new issue. Other terms used apart from workplace literacy are Employee Basic Skills and Workplace Basics. Workplace literacy program is often associated with providing benefits to employers and employees. Therefore, to reap the benefits, these countries have come up with workplace literacy programs for their employees.

Workplace Literacy comes in various definitions. In general workplace literacy comprised of essential skills like communication, mathematics, technology, teamwork and lifelong learning needed by an employee to perform his or her duties successfully. Communication can be related to the language used in communicating with fellow colleagues and in performing daily duties.

Workplace Literacy programs are important, however, considerations should be taken on whether the programs are suitable and effective to the employees and employers. This is to avoid spending energy, time, and money on programs that do not benefit both the organization and the employee. Thus, a needs analysis should be conducted.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study sought to find out whether English is necessary among the supporting staff in public universities. To achieve this, the study examined the workers' needs and actual use of language at the workplace, the workers' wants, and the workers' lacks in the English language.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions for this research are:

- What are the workers' needs and actual use of language at the workplace?
- What are the types of the English training courses preferred by the workers?
- What are the workers' lacks in the English language?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some studies were conducted on the English usage among workers in countries where English is considered as the second language. Tiong & May (1996) conducted a study on blue-collar workers in a company in Penang.

They discovered that the support staff used colloquial Malay in communication among peers. In studies conducted by Morias (1990; 1998) and Nair-Venugopal (1997) in West Malaysia, they found that Malay or a mixture of Malay and English were used by the lower staff to communicate (as cited in Ting, 2002).

Studies on the same issue were conducted in countries where English is a foreign language. In a study by Mahmoud A. Al-Khatib (2005) on the communication needs of tourism and banking personnels, the English skills are used more by the respondents from the tourism agency compared to the banking employees. Similarly, in Korea, Hyeson Park & Bora Jung (2006) conducted a case study on the English usage in the Korean workplace. It was discovered that English was “not much in demand” at the workplace. From a different perspective, a comparative study on the importance of the English language skills in the tourism sector was conducted in Croatia (Bobanovic & Grzinic, 2009). The perceptions of the students of the Economics and Tourism Department and the tourist agency employees were taken into consideration to compare the English usage between the two groups. The study revealed that English among the employees is mostly used for easy communication with the business partners. The students, on the other hand, only used English for fun and entertainment. The only similarity between the two groups was both used the Internet as a media in communicating in the English language.

RESEARCH METHODS

The information regarding the workers’ needs and actual use of language at the workplace, the workers’ wants, and the workers’ lacks in the English language were obtained from a self-report questionnaire.

Sampling Design

The subjects were 60 supporting staff who work at the counters of three public universities in the Northern Region of Malaysia. In attaining the samples, the permanent workers who have worked at their respective institution for more than one year were chosen.

Questionnaire

A set of questionnaire was adapted from a study conducted by Mahmoud A. Al-Khatib (2005). The questionnaire comprised of 33 questions that covered 3 aspects namely; workers’ needs and actual use, workers’ wants, and workers’ lacks. The questionnaire is divided into two parts: Part A: Demographic details. Part B contains information on the three aspects: Thirteen questions are posed on the respondents regarding the worker’s needs and actual use of

English at the workplace, eight questions asked the respondents regarding their wants in terms of the types of English courses preferred and eight questions are posed on the respondents regarding their lacks in the English language. The questionnaire was piloted to a set of respondents and the calculated value of Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test is 0.766.

Data Analysis

The data collected were computed using the descriptive statistics; frequency and percentage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Workers' Needs and Actual Use of Language at the Workplace

The results of the survey revealed that the respondents needed English for several purposes such as communication, improving performance in the language, reading English materials (books, newspapers etc), for watching English programs and also to be more fluent in the language (100% respectively). Respondents also needed English for a job, studying in the language, promotion purposes (85.7%) and for traveling abroad (71.4%).

The results (100% scores) indicated that the respondents need English for their personal or self-development rather than for job performance. Furthermore, the percentages recorded for the job and promotion purposes are much lower than the rest. This further supports their need of English is for their self-development.

As for the language used in the workplace, the respondents rated much higher for Only Malay and Mostly Malay used at the workplace as compared to Malay and English and Only English used in their daily duties such as Correspondence, Filing and documentation, Communication with other colleagues and Dealing in public relations. The only language used category that recorded a high rate of Malay and English used is in dealing with public relations, with 30%. The results showed that in their daily job activities, the workers do not really use English. Thus, this explains the earlier finding that the workers need the English language for self-development rather than in enhancing their job performance. The only task that they may need the use of English would be in dealing with the public relations.

The Type of English Training Courses Preferred by Workers

In response to the question 'What kind of English Training Courses do you

like to be enrolled in?', all of the respondents preferred English training courses that can help improve their English proficiency like Vocabulary, Grammar, Writing Skills, Reading Skills, Listening Skills, Speaking Skills and also courses that can improve their ability in using the Internet.

The workers seemed to accept all types of English courses as long as the courses can improve their general English proficiency. Among all the language skills given, none of them is actually much preferred than the rest. Apart from that, the respondents also preferred courses that can help them use the Internet. Thus, it is apparent that the workers need English for their personal use rather than for their job performance.

The Workers' Lacks in the English Language

When asked to self-assess their English language proficiency, most of the respondents rated their speaking skill (56%) as Weak and their reading (56%), writing (67%) and listening skills (67%) as Satisfactory. This finding indicates that the workers are not satisfied with their communicative ability in English as compared to other language skills.

This is further supported by the finding of the question, 'What kind of skills do you use more often?', was asked. In response to the question, 80% of the respondents rated Rarely used English in speaking. While 20% did not use English at all in speaking. This is the only language skill that no score was recorded for Mostly used. As for reading, writing and listening, the highest scores recorded were for Rarely used which were 90%, 70% and 60% respectively. Even though the scores were high, there were still some workers who rated Mostly used for these three skills (10% - 30%). Thus, the lack of usage of the speaking skill at the workplace has resulted in the workers rating the speaking skill as the weakest skill.

CONCLUSION

The respondents agreed that they need English to communicate and to improve their performance in English. Besides that, they also need English to read English materials, to watch English programs and to be more fluent in English. A high majority of the respondents need English to study in the language, to get a job and also to be promoted. There are quite a significant number of respondents who need English for traveling abroad. Based on the responses it can be concluded that the respondents are aware that English is important because they need English for a variety of purposes.

However, regarding which language is used in the workplace, only a minority of the respondents used Only English in correspondence at the workplace. As

for Filing and documentation, and Communication with other colleagues and Dealing with public relations, Malay is mostly used. Therefore, it can be concluded that Malay is the language used at the workplace. This is in relation to other researches made by Morais (1990 & 1998); Nair Venugopal (1997) & Tiong & May (1996) which highlighted that "... support staff are less likely to speak English in the workplace" (as cited in Ting, 2002,137). In addition, Al-Khatib (2005, 175 - 176) stated

"...it has been observed that the type of language used by each worker is influenced by the workers' working instrument (see for example Pogner, 2003; Zak and Dudley-Evans, 1986), by his aims and professional constraints, as well as by his specializations and the types of duties assigned to him, and by the texts the worker produces and deals with (example Edwards, 2000; Macintosh, 1990)".

All the respondents felt that they need all the different skills required in English (vocabulary, grammar, writing, reading, listening, speaking and skills in using the internet). This shows that although they did not actually use English in performing their duties, they did not deny that they need all the skills to improve their English proficiency.

The results revealed that the speaking skill was rated as the weakest skill among the other language skills. In answering the question on the kind of skills they used more often, a high majority of the respondents rarely used English in speaking. Surprisingly, there were also respondents who did not use English at all in speaking. This further support the conclusion made earlier where the speaking skill was the weakest skill discovered among the respondents. As for reading, writing, and listening skills, the respondents rarely used these skills at their workplace.

Therefore, a general conclusion can be made that English is rarely used among the workers working at the counters at the public universities. This shows that although the employees know the importance of English, English is not used in their everyday dealing at the workplace. This supports the notion made by Krahnke, Hoffman and Krahnke (2003), "In any situation in which there's one language that is socially regarded as the most common, other languages are often accorded little importance" (p.148).

In general, English is viewed positively; however, in performing their daily duties, as the support staff in the public universities, it is not necessary. English is still considered important but only for individual development and

not for workplace use or organization.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, English is considered as an added value to the workers. This is because English is not necessary in their everyday duties at the workplace. However, the knowledge of English would be an advantage to the workers. They would have higher chances of being promoted. Perhaps when the number of foreign students is higher, then the need to use English at the workplace would increase.

Employers should provide English courses that could enhance the workers' communicative abilities. Apart from that, employers should also expose the workers to the type of English for personal use for example for watching English movies, listening to English news and reading English materials. In this context, learning English is considered as a move towards lifelong learning. Since the findings of this study were based on the workers' perceptions who work at the counters of public universities therefore, this does not reflect their employers' perceptions and this also does not reflect other institutions or organizations. Hence, future research should investigate the employers' perceptions and the workers who work at the counters at private universities or colleges.

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