



Manufacturing Industry Employers' Perception of Graduates' English Language Skills Proficiency

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Abstract

Proficiency in English language skills among graduates that create advantages for the organization is preferred by prospective employers as one of the main criteria for employability. This article provides an overview of undergraduates in higher education and also workplace literacy from the perspective of the employers in the manufacturing industry. The result from the research demonstrates that Malaysian manufacturing industry employers perceive that the graduate employees' English language proficiency skills are still below their expectations. Therefore, this study recommends that there is a need for intervention into language teaching to improve the English language syllabus level of English proficiency at primary, secondary and tertiary level. At the same time, emphasis on the importance of English in everyday use should be inculcated without neglecting the national language of Malaysia. This will ensure that the teaching of English will be in line with globalization and current workplace demands.

Keywords: English language skills proficiency, manufacturing industry employers, graduates

1. Introduction

The business and corporate world considers English as the language for international communication and also for top management meetings and negotiations. Employed graduates who hold decision-making positions are required to have a good command of English language to enable them to communicate efficiently with all levels of staff. Employers expect employees to possess excellent communication skills apart from knowledge and expertise in their respective technical fields.

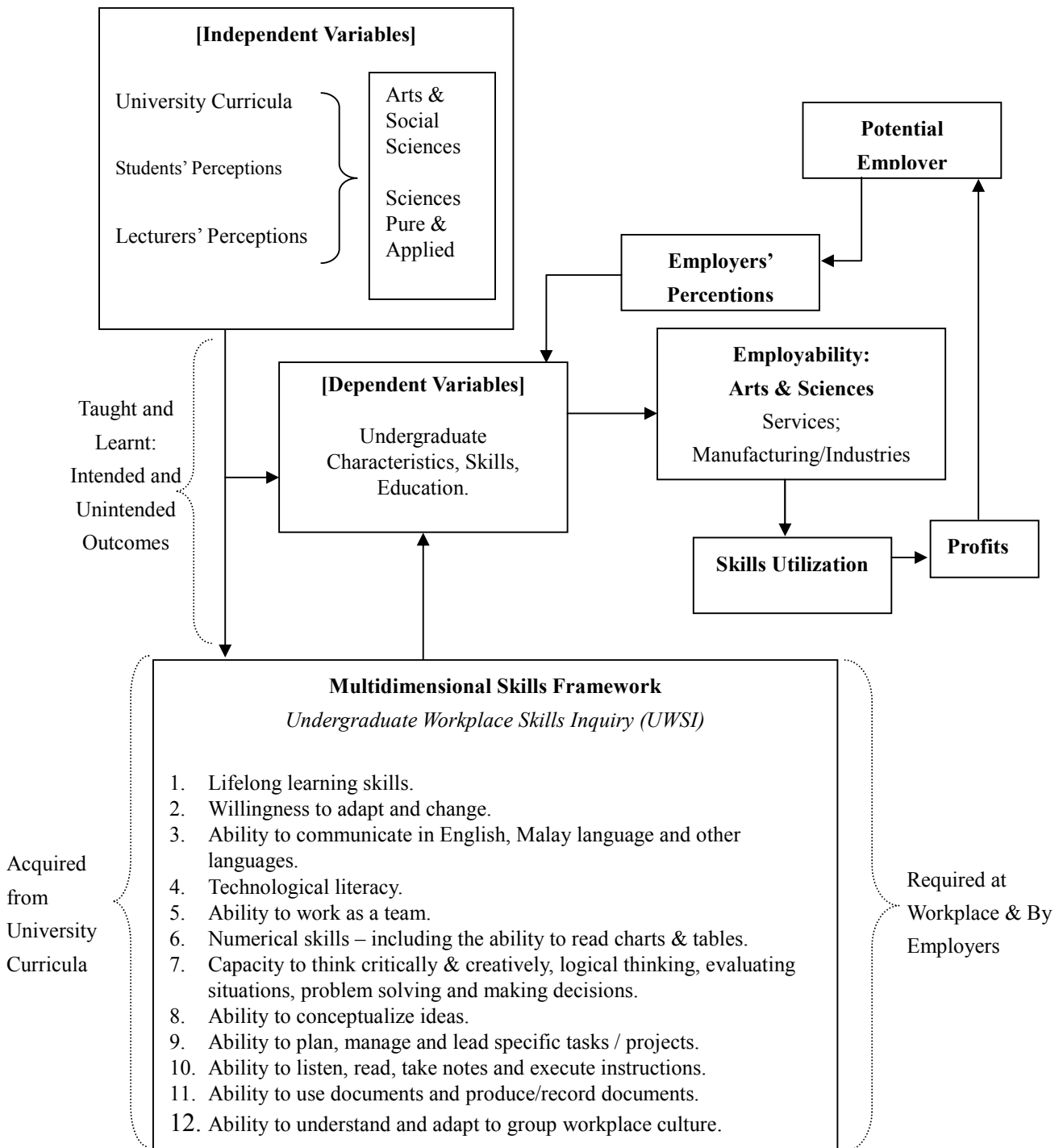
A lot of studies have been done internationally and locally on the issue of graduates' language proficiency at the workplace. The studies have looked into the issues such as language needs, language proficiency, employer expectation, etc. Most studies have concluded that graduates are not fully equipped in terms of their English language proficiency to function at the workplace. This conceptual paper will discuss a theoretical framework and research findings on employers' perception of graduates' English language skills proficiency. At the same time, it will provide recommendations to graduates, stakeholders and educators to improve graduates' proficiency in this area.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this conceptual paper is the conceptual framework developed by a group of researchers at the National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN) (USM). The conceptual framework is

Undergraduate Workplace Skills Inquiry (UWSI). The framework has been developed to study the variables that influence employability and their correlation to university curricula. The UWSI theorizes that employment is determined by the employers' perceived characteristics of the employee; ability to work smarter and better, adaptability to changes in the workplace, enhanced employer-employee relationships, union relationships and hence increased output and profitability. The usefulness of the framework is that it identifies the type of skills and educational percepts that need to be inculcated among undergraduates through the various non-science programmes conducted by the universities (National Higher Education Research Institute – IPPTN).

2.1 Framework Design





3. Literature Review

3.1 *The Role of English as a Global Language*

The role of a language is very crucial in today's world. The increasing prominence can be attributed to the influence of technology and information technology in every aspect of life. These developments have been growing rapidly from developed nations and expanded to developing countries. One of the languages affected by this phenomenon is English.

English has been proclaimed as the main language of international business (Rivers, 2008). Thus, as English becomes a major international language for communication globally, it necessitates the need for specific course content for the respective professionals working in global business environment as we see reasons across the countries for professionals working in such environments to possess a good command and proficiency in English.

The question to ponder upon is what made English become such an important language for communication. It is undeniably technology and globalization. These two entities demand cross cultural communication and collaboration. Graduates are expected to possess excellent communication skills apart from knowledge and expertise in their respective technical field (Dayal, 2005). Furthermore in the context of Malaysia, it has been asserted that English is correlated with higher income and job productivity. Knowledge workers of the Information and Communication Age will not be able to participate effectively in global and local productions of knowledge if they do not master the English language (Pandian, 2006).

3.2 *The Role of English in Malaysia*

The developing nations like Malaysia have to compete with the developed nations because of globalization. In doing so, we need to be competent in the language that is used by the developed nations; the language of technology, the language used globally, the language that will enable developing nations to survive. That language is English as mentioned by Hamidah Yamat @ Ahmad, et al (2003).

English is taught as a subject from Year One in all Malay medium primary schools and Year Three in Chinese and Tamil schools. Further, in higher education, English is widely used as most of the reference texts are in English. University undergraduates study English as a compulsory subject. English plays an important role in the social, economic and educational life of the students.

In 1991, the former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, raised a concern regarding the poor results of the national English language examination. He was perturbed that Malaysia might not only lose its economic competitiveness but also find it hard to progress in the industrial and technical fields if its workforce was not competent in English (Pillay, 1998). Information gathered from another source quoted that it has been reported that the teaching of English in public schools and universities is not on par to meet the challenges of knowledge-based economy. He admitted that the government was producing teachers who lack proficiency in English, and would thus have to hire language teachers from other countries or retrain local teachers to speak better English (The Star, 29 Dec 2000).

3.3 *Overview of the Development of English Language in Malaysia*

Various measures have been taken by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to improve the standard of English in Malaysia such as designing new syllabi, increasing teacher training facilities, creating twinning programmes with overseas institutions, hiring native English teachers and providing student-teacher training abroad. In the 1980s, the integrated curriculum for primary schools (KBSR- Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah) and the integrated curriculum for secondary schools (KBSM – Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah) were implemented with the aim of making teaching and learning more effective. The new curricula aimed to teach English as an effective second language through the English syllabus (Singh, Kell, & Pandian, 2002).

Subsequently, to ensure the continuity of English language improvement, Malaysian University Test (MUET) was introduced in 1999 at the post secondary level. The MUET syllabus seeks to bridge the gap in language needs between secondary and tertiary education. This would be done by enhancing the communicative competence of students to a level appropriate for tertiary education, providing contexts for language use related to tertiary needs and preparing students to meet various academic challenges through the competent use of language use in language skills. This examination was made a mandatory requirement for entry into local universities by school leavers. All undergraduates would have undergone the MUET course irrelevant of the band obtained. The government is aware that English language is the key to international communication and access to English language and literacy skills are key criteria for participation in the global economy (Singh, Kell & Pandian, 2002).



3.4 Skills

Communication shapes our senses of self and the way we interact in our environment. It reflects our personality, our thoughts, and helps in the transfer of our knowledge. Graduates need to practice communication in order to achieve competency in their everyday communication. Communication is vital for successful participation of work.

Communication in terms of language skills are listening, speaking, reading and writing. These skills were collectively described as *active skills* (speaking and writing) and *passive skills* (reading and listening).

Today, listeners and readers are no longer regarded as passive. They are seen as active participants in the negotiation of meaning. The interest of communication lies in the moves and strategies of the participants.

The terms that best represent the collaborative nature of what goes on are interpretation, expression and negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 1991).

3.5 Language Proficiency

Some common synonyms for the term proficiency include words like ability, expertise or competence, implying a high level of skill, well-developed knowledge or polished performance (Brown, 1994). According to Savignon (1997) competence is defined as a presumed underlying ability and performance as the overt manifestation of that ability. Competence is what one knows. Performance is what one does. However, only performance is observable, and it is only through performance that competence can be

developed, maintained and evaluated.

3.6 Malaysia's Manufacturing Industry

Malaysia's industrialization is guided by the Industrial Master Plan (IMP). On 18 August 2006, the Malaysian government launched the third Industrial Master Plan (IMP3), a 15-year plan, towards realizing the vision of becoming a fully developed nation by the year 2020. The third Industrial Master Plan (IMP3) maintains that the manufacturing sector will remain an important contributor towards the Malaysian economy alongside the service sector. In 2005 the manufacturing sector contributed 31.4% of the gross domestic product (GDP).

The manufacturing industry provides a strong financial contribution towards the growth of Malaysia's economy. The manufacturing companies are ubiquitous in most of the states in Malaysia. The bulk of concentration of foreign owned and local manufacturing companies are in the states of Penang, Selangor, Perak, and other states. Penang for example, is the "Silicon Island of the East" for high technology manufacturing. Despite the emergence of China and India as competitors, we continue to 'shine' as a high-tech international manufacturing centre. At the end of Jan 2005, there were 1.01 million people employed in the manufacturing sector alone (NST, 18/03/05). According to the national bank of Malaysia, *Bank Negara*, the manufacturing sector expanded by 5.4%. In the manufacturing sector which generates about one third of the country's GDP, Malaysian manufacturers invested a total amount of RM1, 416 million in IT in 2003 (IMP3-HRD-TF1-Section 4). The electronic industry is Malaysia's leading manufacturing sector with 900 companies employing about 330,000 workers and exporting US\$63.5bil worth of electronic and electrical products (NST22/04/05). As for Penang, there are more than 200 multinational corporations in Penang such as Agilent, Motorola, Osram, Seagate, etc. 35.3% (200,000) are employed in the manufacturing sector in Penang Development Corporation (PDC) industrial parks (The Star, 28/02/08).

Jobs in our manufacturing industry are highly regarded due to attractive remunerations, adequate medical benefits, travelling opportunities, ongoing training and options for sponsored further education programmes. As a leading financial contributor to Malaysia's economy, the perception of the employers in the manufacturing industry regarding graduates' English language proficiency should be given due consideration as foreign investors in the manufacturing industry are mostly concerned with the rapid decline in English language skills among younger graduates and that the skills expectations of young graduates do not match industry requirements. The standard of English has been rapidly declining as the graduates' command of English, spoken and written, is poor; and graduates were unable to comprehend technical documentation, instructions in business English and had inept writing skills.

According to Zubaidah Awang et al. (2006), lately, the manufacturing industry in Malaysia is experiencing a changing trend from an industry relying on cheap and relatively less-skilled labor towards knowledge-based activities. Due to the shifting of investment and operation particularly foreign direct investment (FDI) to more



cost-effective economies (such as Vietnam, China and Cambodia), Malaysia can no longer rely on labor intensive industries to remain competitive. The new requirement creates a gap in the quality of graduates produced by institutions of higher learning and those required by industries. Thus, the employability of Malaysian graduates is becoming more dependent on the mastery of work skills that are emerging as a fundamental for success in the 21st century. These include skills of critical analysis, evaluation, experimentation, collaboration, communication, abstraction, system thinking and persuasion (Reich, 1991). Due to globalization, these skills are increasingly applied in English language contexts. The transfer of technology in this industry in the world of globalization is powered through literacy. Language being a form of literacy is also central to the progress and success of the industry. Language competency is vital and greatly emphasized as the manufacturing industry confronts, engages and embraces the overwhelming forces of globalization. English language in particular, being the lingua franca or the international language is considered vital in day-to-day communication in the manufacturing industry.

The current realities from research indicate that the expectations of employers and future employers of university graduates are high and encompass various skills and aspects such as linguistic capabilities, information and technology (ICT) skill and many other skills (Pandian & Aniswal, 2005). Therefore, preparing oneself in terms of content knowledge of one's specialization and academic qualification is not sufficient to ensure optimum performance in a working environment.

Graduates need to possess good communication skills that include oral and written competencies in English. There are a variety of ways for communication to take place. All forms of communication apart from non-verbal communication (e.g. body language, gestures) need language as an agent of transmission. Therefore, the language that is used, and how well it is used will ensure the success of the communication. Research shows that the three main types of communication are verbal, non-verbal and written communication such as reports, memos, letters etc. (Maes et.al., 1997). An example of application of these "forms of oral communication" refers to communicative events engaged daily at the workplace such as telephone conversations, meetings, formal discussions, presentations, social interactions and interviews. The term "skills in oral communication" refers to the entire knowledge and ability that enables one to do something well and includes the following skills: listening skills, conversational skills, giving feedback, meeting skills, presentation skills, handling customer complaints, conflict resolution skills, negotiation skills, taking customers' orders, training skills, interviewing skills, persuading skills and promoting one's own strengths and abilities (Maes et.al., 1997).

Consequently, the level of proficiency in the English language is crucial to indicate the effectiveness of communication. In a study conducted by Boyette (1995 cited in Miller et al, 1997), engineering graduates spent almost 56% of their working time in oral communication. The study also reveals that graduate employees spend most of their time communicating with people who are in the same department with them, such as their peers and superiors, while half as much time is spent with people from other companies, such as vendors, customers, regulators and the media. Among the communication activities performed by the graduate employees were personal activities and status reports, group meetings, giving instructions and formal presentations.

Adler & Elmhorst (2002) contend that when face-to-face communication is not possible, teleconferencing, telephone and voice mail may take place at workplace. They also highlight the importance of good listening skills as the relationship between listening and speaking needs to be emphasized since both skills are interrelated.

4. Statement of Problem - Analyzing perception

Manufacturing is a fast growing industry in Malaysia. It provides jobs to many people ranking from the lowest to the highest position in an organization. In return it demands that the workforce would be able to contribute towards the organization. To be able to contribute towards the organization one is attached to, one needs a variety of attributes such as being competent, skilled, knowledgeable, and technologically savvy, to name some. Adversely, there are graduates that lack the skills and knowledge to function at the workplace. This is known as *skills gap*. There is a gap between what the universities supply and what is demanded by the employers. As quoted by Smith (2000), there are significant gaps between what universities offer and what industries demand. Schools and universities have been blamed and criticized for their failure to adequately prepare students for employment (The Star, 3 September, 2002). In 2003, the former Education Minister, Tan Sri Musa Mohamad, called upon public universities to reexamine their training and university programmes to see how "they can overcome the perceived weakness of graduates in terms of low English language proficiency and lack of communication and leadership skills" (The Star, 6 November 2003).

According to a press report quoting the previous Human Resources Minister Datuk Dr. Fong Chan Onn, the private sector is not keen on recruiting local graduates for employment because of their inability to communicate well in



English, lack of ICT proficiency and lack of interpersonal skills (The Star, 20/08/03). This claim can be further supported by the findings of a study by Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF), involving 205 member companies. The outcome of the study was that the major problem among local graduates is their inability to communicate well in English (Sunday Star, 9 June 2002).

According to Tiong (2000), communicative abilities are considered strength in the multinational industries in Malaysia. Successful communication is vital for the functioning of any organization. Information must be conveyed, received, understood and acted upon in a proper manner in order to maintain an organizational efficiency. With the diversity in the nature of business of multinational companies, Malaysians have to deal with foreign managers, employees, suppliers, customers, distributors, etc., whose social and communicative backgrounds differ significantly from theirs. A preliminary study carried out among top managers of some multinational companies in Penang Free Trade Zone during the English Language Awareness Campaign at a university in Malaysia in January, 1994 and Management Week in February 1994 in Tiong (2000) revealed the following features in a multinational setting in Malaysia:

- a. Proficiency in language skills is one of the key tools for success as language abilities are viewed as critically important. The more proficient an employee is in language skills, the more adequate the employee will be.
- b. English is proclaimed to be an indispensable tool in the functioning of any multinational organization, both for administrative and operational purposes. The English language pre-dominates all staff meetings presided over by management. Contacts and negotiations are mostly conducted in English. All formal correspondences are written in English.
- c. English language abilities and skills are important for one who aspires to climb the corporate ladder. It is perceived that to be eligible for promotions, employees need an adequate standard of English.
- d. Written skills are seriously stressed and not easily excused compared to verbal speech errors.

Tiong's (2000) study entitled "Language Needs of a Multinational Company in Penang, Malaysia : A Case Study of Robert Bosch (M) Sdn Bhd", revealed that the use of English at the workplace is given the highest rating in importance compared to Malay Language, Mandarin, German, Japanese and Tamil. The response undeniably pointed out that the respondents, especially the officers who had the responsibility of executing tasks see the need to listen intently to understand and to clear doubts and uncertainties. Speaking skill was also prioritized by managers. Being in management positions, there is a need to be vocal while delegating and coordinating the workforce. Managers also need to guide, administer, control and direct subordinates under them. Thus, the ability to communicate is important. Feedback from interviews also highlighted that managers who have a wide vocabulary in languages would have a competitive edge over others when it comes to the speaking skill. Managers need to be constantly reading to keep themselves updated and informed about developments which also help in self improvement. Writing skills are also highly needed for writing out procedures and documents in order for the tasks to be carried out effectively. Writing then has to be appropriate, clear, precise and comprehensible. Writing demands are more vital for managers because managers are required to write out summaries of results, protocol of meetings, give accounts of results lists and carry out status reports. This is parallel to the study carried out by Noor Azizi Ismail et. al. (2001), that reading and writing are two important non-technical skills used widely in organizations. Writing skill is needed as most technical reports are in written form while reading skill is necessary because these reports will be read by others in the organizations.

Another survey by the Productivity and Investment Climate Survey (<http://bond.npc.org.my>) found that most skilled workers lacked the following skills (listed in order of importance): English language proficiency, information and technology skills, communication skills, etc. 29% of the managers perceived foreign trained professionals as better performers than those who were locally trained. This indicates that there might be a gap in the Malaysian education or training systems. The American Malaysian Chamber of Commerce also found that one of the challenges faced by US firms in Malaysia was the rapid decline in English language skills.

In a recent study conducted by Kaur and Lee (2006) on analyzing workplace oral communication needs in English among IT graduates in the manufacturing industry, the IT employers rate the following skills highly: following instructions, giving feedback, listening skills and effective oral presentation skills. The survey results showed that the mean scores for the IT graduates' actual oral communication performance in English in all types of oral communication skills are lower than the mean scores perceived by the employers. This indicates that IT graduates' performance is lower than their employers' expectations in all types of oral communication skills in English. The



employers also perceived that presentation skills, listening skills, interviewing skills and conversational skills in English are vital for IT employees in the manufacturing industry. The employers also stated that universities and organizations should jointly shoulder the responsibility of training and developing IT graduates' oral communication skills in an effort to further enhance graduates' oral communication ability.

The National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN) conducted a research on University Curriculum: An Evaluation on Preparing Graduates for Employment, and one of the findings from the view of employers regarding the generic skills required by employers, is language skills. All the employers interviewed in the study stressed that they seek employees with speaking and writing skills in English. These abilities are vital characteristics of employees. The employers from the manufacturing sectors want the quality of graduates to be improved. They requested the graduates to be trained to be prepared for job interviews and to have read widely and extensively. On the contrary, local universities' graduates in general have low English language proficiency. As for the survey findings from the view point of graduates, in relation to English, half of the 239 graduates that responded stated that they are proficient in speaking, reading and listening (Pandian & Aniswal, 2005).

An empirical research on the perceptions of Malaysian employers regarding employability and workplace literacy was conducted by Mustapha (1999). The purpose of the study was to examine employers' perceptions regarding the critical workplace literacy and employability skills of vocational graduates. The sample consisted of 120 employers from large and medium sized manufacturing companies. The employers indicated that they were less satisfied regarding the graduates' motivation, communication, and interpersonal skills.

Adelina Iskandar in her paper presentation on "Malaysia's Manpower Requirements for 21st Century : Matching Industry Needs with Educational Output (2002), quoted that in terms of language skills, employers require English-speaking graduates because they believe English language is the key factor in facing the globalization era. What Adelina (2002) quoted is in tandem with the expectation that all prospective employers, irrespective of fields of work, have about the graduates that are attached or will be attached to their organization. Majority of the manufacturing industry employers are foreign investors. Therefore, with the widespread use of English as the international language of business, a workforce's ability to communicate effectively in English can give a non native English-speaking country a competitive edge and attract lucrative foreign investments. Furthermore, with our neighboring countries such as Thailand and the newly emerging economy of Vietnam vying for the foreign investors with their low cost labor, an English language proficient labor force would indeed be a valuable attribute to be looked upon in the decision-making process for retaining as well as further investments.

According to Zawiyah Omar (2005), having excellent written and spoken English skills are increasingly important requirements because of the need to communicate not only internally but also externally to counterparts and customers around the world. Speaking proficiency alone is not sufficient, in fact, writing skills in the language are equally important.

The trend is even more worrying when the undergraduates themselves rate themselves lowly. In a detailed study commissioned by the government, "Laporan Kajian Kedudukan Badan-Badan Berkanun Di Sektor Awam - Klasifikasi Fungsi Pendidikan" (*Survey Report on the Position of Statutory Bodies in the Government Sector – Classification Based on Education Functions*) (1994), the students rated themselves even lower than the rating by top level officials and academicians. Among the attributes that were graded lower were multi-linguistic skills, moral, global views and communication. It is not only that the graduates are perceived negatively in their language proficiency; the undergraduates also perceive themselves as having lower proficiency in language.

Hamidah Yamat @ Ahmad, et al (2003) indicated in their study that undergraduates who have reached their final year are still uncertain whether their present language competency is sufficient for them to venture into their particular fields of occupation or even to be employed in the first place. It was also discovered that 490 third year students in a Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia) study, had considered themselves incompetent in the speaking and writing skills, which are deemed as the productive skills. In terms of the receptive skills, it is shown that they are able to listen and read well, but they cannot use the language to develop and convey new knowledge. In other words, they are knowledgeable but unable to use or express this knowledge. To add to that, it had been identified that Malay graduates' failure in being hired was due to their incompetencies in the English language (Berita Harian, 04/03/02).

Lee's (2003) study found that many employers of engineering graduates of Monash University, an off-shore branch university in Malaysia, expressed dissatisfaction with their hired engineering graduates and revealed that having technical skills alone is not enough as technical employees need soft skills, such as problem solving, interpersonal communication, planning, people management, team management and cost control to enable them to



perform their work effectively. Lee (2003) also found that a majority of employers expressed dissatisfaction with engineering graduates' communication abilities and that these communication abilities range from poor written and oral communication skills to performances in their work. In her study, she found that technical graduates were particularly poor in their oral communication, skills in the aspects of presentation, informal discussion, public speeches and interviews.

Unfortunately, some graduates are not bothered with what is expected of them by their employers and industry as mentioned by a director of Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF), Shamsuddin Bardan. This is something unusual that needs further attention because students spent enormous time and money to get a place at a university, but once there, the students seemed to be heedless of the challenges they will face at the workplace.

Besides, as Andersen (2002) points out,

“The development in multinational firms towards flatter structures and horizontal co-operation and communication to ensure the integration of all parts of the firm, makes the dependency of a common language even stronger.”

Findings from the study of Siti Hamin et al. (2005) revealed that graduates who applied for jobs in an organization are found to be inadequate and ineffective in terms of ideas, accuracy and presentation as portrayed in their writing samples. The most important finding in this study is that there exists a mismatch between the respondents' level of written literacy in English and the writing demands at the workplace.

In supporting the claims made on the perception of employers, a survey of 3300 Human Resources Managers by an Internet Recruitment Website, JobStreet.com, between March 29-31 (2005), revealed that many fresh graduates' poor command of the English language prevented companies from hiring them despite a wide availability of jobs. In the survey, managers were asked their 3 top reasons for not hiring fresh graduates. The most popular answer was that they had poor command of English which was the highest at 56%. (The Star, 02/04/05).

5. The Way Forward - Who should be blamed?

The low level of English proficiency only serves to undermine the qualities, attributes and skills of the graduates. The incompetencies of graduates will be reflected in their proficiency level. This in turn will affect recruitment and retention of employees in the industry. The language weakness will reinforce negative stereotypes of the graduates.

Is it fair to point fingers at the higher education institution for failing to fulfill its obligation in ensuring the graduates are well prepared in language proficiency to support the demands of the manufacturing industry? Undergraduates who spend three to four years at varsities to gain knowledge are required to prepare themselves as specialists in the fields they majored in. In addition, they are also required to attain a required level of language proficiency in the Malay and English language, and also participate in other relevant activities to be competent graduates. The courses at the universities may well be responsible, at least to some degree, for the level of poor communication skills. These pressures have led our future graduates to race against time to complete their mission at the university. How can one expect the graduates to master all these trades? Furthermore, the entry level of language proficiency of the undergraduates differs vastly. It is impossible to close the wide gap, not to mention the impossibility to narrow the language gap between the offerings of the graduates and expectations of the employers.

Who should be blamed? Do we blame the language instructors for not doing their job well; the undergraduates themselves for not being able to achieve proficiency in English; the secondary school language teachers for ignoring the language weakness of students who are preparing to enter university, or do we blame the primary school language teachers for not ingraining in the students a strong foundation of the language. These are some of the issues that need to be given considerable thought and researched extensively.

5.1 Recommendations

Graduates in the workplace need to have a certain level of English language proficiency to be able to function effectively and efficiently. To nurture the language proficiency, it has to start with nature. The acquisition of second language should be initiated at infancy parallel to the acquisition of mother tongue or first language. The acquisition of the second language which is English for the majority in Malaysia should not be ignored until one reaches school-going age. This role has to begin with the parents, family, and the surrounding environment.



The proficiency level of teachers also needs to be looked into. Firstly, are the language trainees competent and committed for the job? Next, do they have the interest in language teaching? The teaching profession has always been a secondary choice for people who could not find jobs in the private or commercial sector. Therefore, this is a profession that does not attract people with a high level of competency in English to be trained as language teachers.

The present education system at tertiary level needs to be looked into. The position of English as a second language has put more impact on what is expected of our graduates. Being a participant of the globalized world, we have to be competent in the language of globalization and technology. The higher education institutions should also reanalyze and redefine their objectives of teaching and learning methodologies to meet the growing needs of the manufacturing industry. These institutions should envision and realize the objectives of producing professionals who are competent practitioners with proficiency in communication paralleled with technical knowledge.

Enhancing the language skills across the curricula, again rather than in a stand-alone subject, will contribute to some positive changes. This includes delivery of oral presentations in English during their undergraduate years. Overall, this may involve a restructuring of certain components of courses and, indeed, the curriculum. According to Reimer (2002), experiential approaches, which involve the student in the actual experience of communication, with opportunities for debriefing and re-application, provide opportunities for the development of self-awareness. In terms of the speaking skill, videotape playbacks of oral presentations also stimulate reflection in students. Constructivist approaches build on past learning and should be utilized to build on students' positive learning experiences to enhance learning and skills development.

One of the programmes that can aid in exposing the undergraduates towards the importance of the use of English language in the manufacturing industry is industrial training. At present this training is only applicable to final year undergraduates. It seems to be too late to educate them on the importance of the language at the workplace. Therefore, it would be viable if industrial training is initiated continuously throughout the duration of their studies in higher education. In this sense, the undergraduates will be aware of the need of mastering the language if they intend to work in the manufacturing sector.

5.2 Future Direction

The way forward to overcome the negative perception of the employers in the manufacturing industry is to start with a long term plan at the most primary level. Formal proficiency improvement should be initiated at the primary level and the effort should be continuous in the secondary and tertiary level. Focus should begin with the teachers. Teachers should be effective and proficient. Training should be upgraded and professional development of teachers improved. This in return will encourage the use of diversified teaching and learning resources, strategies, and progressive assessments.

Secondly, creation of awareness among the students on the importance of English language for their future should be initiated as early as possible. This process has to start at a young age and not wait till one enters tertiary education as it is impossible to attain proficiency in such a short duration.

According to Siti Hamin et al (2008), graduates face greater challenges in securing jobs these days compared to their former counterparts. Those who are weak in writing skills do not get the jobs which they are otherwise qualified for. One of the ways to do this is by equipping them with the necessary workplace writing skills in English before they embark on their professional careers. Workplace writing skills activities should start at the school level in Malaysian classrooms. The types of writing taught should exemplify what is needed at the workplace. A needs analysis should take place to identify the types of writing required and the students should be geared towards these skills. The preparation of the curriculum and materials based on the needs analysis should integrate all levels of education to ensure continuity and progress.

We have come to a stage whereby it is time for Malaysians to dispel the notion of the status of English as a colonial language. Learning the language and creating empowerment through the language will make graduates more employable. It is now time to make it compulsory to pass the subject of English language at SPM/Form 5 level as an entrance requirement for undergraduates into tertiary level studies.

Issues such as providing equal English learning opportunities in the rural areas as well as in the urban areas should also be looked into. Urban schools are often times privileged to have the best opportunities in learning English, ample resources in English, technology, qualified and competent English teachers compared to the rural schools. More effective plans in terms of allocation of resources, materials, capital and more efforts should be put into action to ensure that rural students also enjoy similar privileges as urban school students.



6. Conclusion

The problem needs to be nipped in the bud. It starts at a young age before a child enters school. The positive environment towards the language outside school will lay a strong foundation for the child in language acquisition. As for immediate solutions, it has to take place at the workplace. One of the effective solutions of overcoming the existing problem in the manufacturing industry is reskilling and retraining the staff. The employers need to play an active role as post-educator in offering opportunities for the staff to reinforce their language skills. In-house or outsourced courses by language professionals will definitely help in getting the graduates to improve their language proficiency. Lastly, the industry should not be the sole party to venture into providing workplace language proficiency programmes. The responsibility of empowering the graduates' language proficiency at the workplace should be shared by both industry and education providers.

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