

Gunadevi K. Jeevi Subramaniam and Raja Nor Safinas Raja Harun (2013). The ability of the polytechnics marketing student in using good English oral communication skills during industrial training. *English for Specific Purposes World*, 14(39).

## **The ability of the polytechnics marketing student in using good English oral communication skills during industrial training**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The main aim of this study is to identify the perception of employers concerning the use of English oral communication skills by the marketing students in polytechnics and the trainees' perception of the skills that they have learned in their proficiency courses before going out for the industrial training. Data are collected through two different sets of questionnaires intended to gauge employers' and trainees' perceptions. We conducted a series of interviews with the employers and on-going observations before the students go for their five months industrial training. The results of this study revealed that employers found that the trainees needed more practice in public speaking in particular when dealing with customers. Moreover, trainees and employers placed similar importance in terms of the ranking of the communicative skills, where both employers and trainees put emphasis on the importance of communicating with customers in English. The results of this study also suggest that more training needs to be given in public speaking before the trainees go out for their industrial training. Learning oral communication and having good proficiency has to be a priority for these marketing students/interns; since they are in a lot of teamwork collaboration with other English-speaking customers at their workplace.*

**Key words:** readiness, training needs, English communication skills.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Many studies have discussed the need of students to have good English oral communication skills. Studies have also indicated that there is a discrepancy between the institution of higher education English language curriculum and what kinds of English are required for jobs purposes (Phosward 1989; Silpa-Anan 1991; Boonjaipet 1992; Crosling and Ward 2002; Vasavakul 2006). Dominguez and Rokowski (2002) refer to the same issue as 'the abyss existing between the goals of the academic and the professional world' and propose an idea of bridging the gap between English for Academic and Occupational purposes. This corresponds to what Grubb and Lazerson (2005) state in *The Journal of Higher Education* that there has been a trend toward the promotion of occupational/ professional education in higher education. With the globalization of trade and economy and the continuing increase of international communication in various fields, the demand for English for

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Specific Purposes is expanding, especially in countries where English is taught as a foreign language (Gao, 2007). Malaysia as a rapidly developing nation plays a crucial role in providing its graduates with all the necessary skills which are considered highly-in-demand in the current market. However, there is not much information on the integration of these skills and how to develop oral communication skills in line with the existing needs of industry during industrial training. Professional information on the learners' modules and the use of English for target situation analysis and objective needs in the workplace are needed before the learners go for their industrial training.

A local Malaysian English daily (The Star, 12 May 2008) reported that a survey conducted by a public university, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), revealed that English language ability among employees was the second most important characteristic sought by prospective employers after critical thinking ability. The Higher Education Minister, Tan Sri Khaled Nordin says that "critical thinking, communication skills, excellent English proficiency and enhanced IT skills must form the common foundation for all graduates regardless of their chosen disciplines" (The Star, 12 May 2008). Lack of industrial training and poor English are among five factors why graduates are unemployed, according to a study conducted by the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (The Star, 12 February 2009). In this regard, graduates with marketing backgrounds face similar problems in terms of seeking employment.

This study seeks to investigate the need of English oral communication skills for effective industrial training from the trainees' perspective and the employers' needs. To support this study, a review of related literature on industrial training, the ESP oral communication skills before going for training, and the learning theories and processes at the workplace are discussed extensively.

### **The gap between graduates' skills and employers' Needs**

Despite the disputable statistics of unemployed graduates, it is still a cause for national concern pertaining to graduates failing to find suitable employment. After spending three years in polytechnic, many graduates are unable to meet the high expectations of employers and this is also due to the tight job market. A significant

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level of graduates being unemployed is highly undesirable as it has social, economic and political consequences. Hence, “there exists some weakness or inefficiency in the education system which has contributed to the inability of these graduates to find suitable employment and make successful transitions into the workplace (Committee Report, 2006.p.10).

Institutions based learning is learning in formal settings in which learning is formal, guided and structured with a predetermined program plan of study with certain number of allocated credits hours assigned to courses. As for The English for Commercial Purposes course, the Marketing students undergo a total of 150 credit hours for a total of 5 semesters to fulfil the curricular structure designed by the Curriculum Development Centre. The content of these course focuses on: dictionary skills, information processing, reading skills, oral communication skills, understanding and writing memorandum, application for industrial attachment, meetings, graphs and charts, business correspondence, processes and procedures, instructions, report writing and job hunting skills. The skills are taught before the students go for their industrial training except for report writing and job hunting skills which are taught after they come back from their industrial training. Industrial training is to be carried out in the fifth semester. Formal learning for the ESP course has mostly occurred within the classroom or lecture halls or in labs with a lecturer to give focus on cognitive skills and the language development of the students.

Formal education is no longer sufficient to guarantee one's future and success, let alone job employability. There has been tremendous demand and high market expectation on the quality of university graduates. Prospective employers are not only expecting high grades, their preferences are now towards candidates that exhibit excellent personal qualities, good mastery of language, in particular English language and possess good communication skills. Henceforth, the polytechnics in the Malaysian context can no longer rest on their laurels by just producing high number of graduates but also have to strategize in breeding a new genre of superb and high calibre graduates that can satisfy job market needs and requirements. The former Higher Education Minister, Shafie Mohd Salleh challenged all institutes of higher learning to intensify efforts to upgrade and identify critical focus areas by producing critical thinking graduates who are marketable and to gain international recognition (UILC News, 2004,June).

Today's competitive business environment places demands on graduates

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that cannot often be provided within academia. Business and education must cooperate to create more real world opportunities for students. However, employers and academic researchers have identified a major gap between corporate needs and graduates skills that resonate how these graduates have little real world experience and need to practice communication skills. This means that graduates need more opportunities to work in teams to develop initiative, persistence and integrity (Neumann and Banghart 2001) in the workplace.

Similarly, there is a need for both polytechnic English oral communication courses (for disciplinary knowledge) to reflect on the job training communication skills to enable graduates to perform effectively in their workplace. Therefore, it is seen of paramount importance to incorporate exposure of workplace oral communication into the polytechnic context. There is a need to assist students to make a smooth transition from the university to actual situation of practice (Maistre and Pare, 2004). The oral communication skills acquired at the polytechnic acts as a principled foundation for the practical knowledge and practice in the work place; hence there is a genuine need for collaboration between polytechnics and the industries. Figure 1 illustrates the learning and activity transition of students from the higher learning institution system to the work place environment.

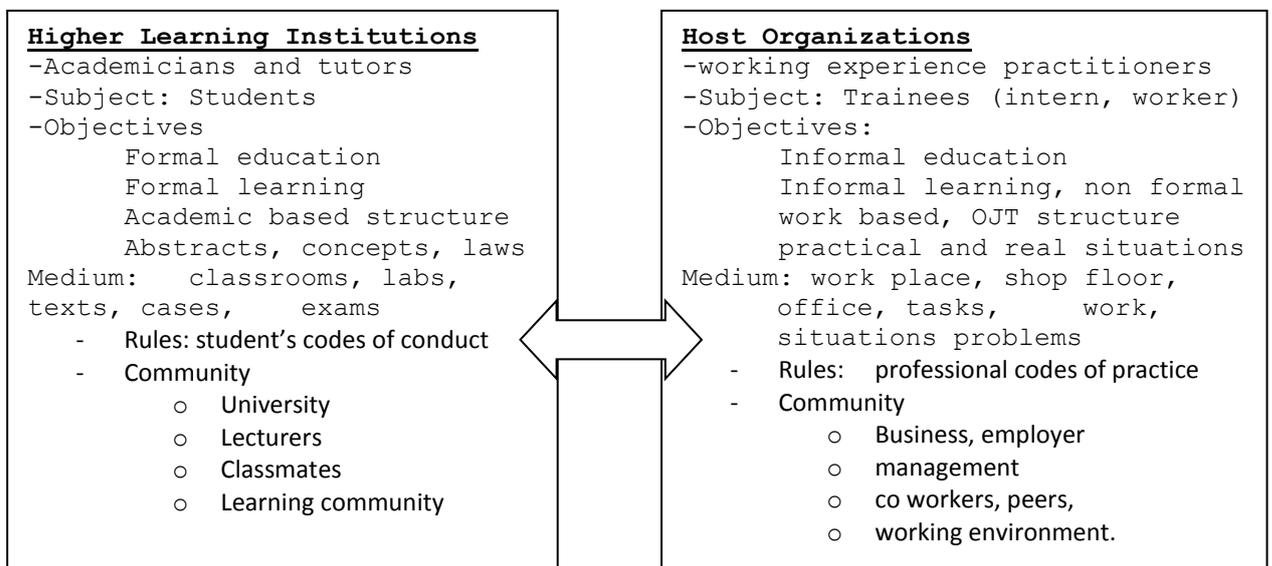


Figure 1: Learning transition from institution to work place.  
Source: Adapted from Maistre and Pare' (2004)

The figure above shows that higher learning institutions and the work place are two radically different activity systems with distinct objectives, medium, roles, processes and activities. When a student moves in to the subject roles of practitioner, the

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objects of the learning activity in the school (the language skills) become “meditational means” in the work place. The focus of learning becomes the means of practice and this is a critical distinction between higher learning institutions and the workplace. The movement between the two activity systems represents the students’ movement from the polytechnic to the workplace; these situations involve a major shift in the behaviour of the students to become trainees and workers in on the job training (OJT) at the work place. Hence, based on this research analysis, it implies the need to introduce the necessary oral communication skills at the workplace into the polytechnic context. Besides that, it is also to maintain a theoretical focus once practice begins (Maistre and Pare, 2004). There is also a need for careful consideration of the content of training in both environments and a concomitant need for collaboration between polytechnics and industry before welcoming graduates into the community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Most of the time education planners put emphasis on what should be taught in institutions of higher learning. More specifically, they sought adequate answers to questions as to why does the student need to learn and the people who are going to be involved (Hutchinson and Waters 1987:21). Therefore, there is a need to analyse and reflect on the oral communication skills introduced to the students before they are sent for their industrial training.

### **Industrial training**

The Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) has conducted a survey on Malaysian graduates and it was discovered that the graduates lack of industrial training and poor English communication skills are among five factors as to why Malaysian graduates face problems of employment (The Malaysian Insider 2011).

Training is a planned and systematic effort to modify or develop knowledge, skills and attitudes through learning experiences in the attempt to achieve effective performance in an activity or range of activities (Noe. 2003; Hashirn, 2001; Garavan et al., 1995). In addition, industrial training is a planned effort by an organization to facilitate employees’ learning of job related competencies such as knowledge, skills or behaviours that are critical for successful job performance. This is perceived generally as an individually oriented educational strategy for an individual change (Knowles, 1973). Industrial training may span across on the job training (OJT). From the human resource development perspective, industrial training emphasizes on job

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focus and the human itself. It is application driven, and aims to impart skills that are useful immediately in particular applications at work or in real life situations. It serves to develop a person towards some form of positive growth that embraces the realities of the environment, as well as to achieve organizational goals and objectives and the actualization of inner reality of emerging self (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 1998). Subsequently, expanding one's potential to take a future role within the organization.

The nature of industrial training is non-formal and generally is regarded as on the job training (OJT). OJT refers to the process in which one person who is often the supervisor or an experienced employee of a work area passes on their job knowledge and skills to another person who is a novice or new employee or trainee (Jacobs, 2003, Noe, 2003). The learning activities are unstructured and based on the realities of work activities and functions. In industrial training, trainees are expected to be actively involved in learning, and that includes carrying out work activities, jobs or specific assignments, solving problems and working together with the people in the organization. Industrial training is application driven and aims to impart skills that are useful immediately in particular situations (Garavari, 1997). Therefore, this study investigate the readiness of the trainees in terms of English oral communication skills performed at the workplace. It is also in the interest of the researchers to study the perception of trainees and the employers' perception towards the trainees.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The subjects for this study were 43 marketing students from a polytechnic who had just finished their industrial training. Employers from 5 different private companies had also participated in the study. The students did their training for 5 months in various companies. This study used both quantitative and qualitative research instruments such as questionnaires for the students and a semi-structured interview for both students and the employers. Observation on the job training was also carried out by the researcher. A single approach to analyze the language needs of the students in any context only yields limited data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Therefore, the researchers implemented both quantitative and qualitative methods for this study. The implementation of mixed methods for the research provides more precise results as quantitative methods mainly reveal the amount of differences but qualitative methods enable the researchers to understand and probe

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further into the data (Hunter, Brewer, 2003).

By interviewing the employers, the researchers were able to evaluate the English needs of the employers holistically in particular their perceptions on the language performance and their insights and suggestions for the improvement of the trainees from the stakeholder point of view. Besides that, the researchers also interviewed the learners to cross-investigate the responses provided by the employers on the existing English language course offered at the polytechnic through questionnaires and interviews. The respondents selected for this study were based on systematic random sampling (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

The construction of the questionnaire was based on the oral communication skills offered at the polytechnics and the need of English at the workplace. The instruments used for the needs analysis survey are questionnaires for employers and learners which is adapted from Munby Communication Needs Processor (CNP) for the syllabus designer. The aspects of identifying language needs were adapted from Hutchinson & Waters (1987) whereby the foci include the language skills which are seen as more important and related to the content of the course.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the information collected from the respondents, the results were analyzed by the researchers. Table 1 shows the students' perceptions on their readiness before going for their industrial training. The students felt they were prepared to perform in the following skills: listening and understanding lecturers during in-house training (M=2.372), listening to complaints by customers (M=2.233), listening to instructions by their supervisors, managers, executives or head of department (M=2.139), listening and understanding contests during a meeting (M=2.186) and listening to the telephone-making enquiries from customers (M=2.139). The marketing learners felt that they have to be involved in various listening tasks in order to perform well during their industrial training.

In extension, the students were prepared to engage in speaking activities that

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require them to give information such as attending to queries, explaining features and benefits as (M=2.163), dealing with customers; like giving explanations, demonstration giving procedural as (M=2.163), participating in meetings and entertaining and other social purposes (M=2.024) and attending to complaints (M=2.0698). However, the means for the students' speaking readiness were lower in speaking activities such as dealing with native speakers (M=1.926), making public statements or acting as spokesman (M=1.878), giving instructions to colleagues (M=1.833) and responding to telephone calls (M=0.698). The summary for the mean rating on the participants have indicated that they placed English oral communication skill as an important communication tool (M=4.210) and the use of English only when it is needed (M=2.972) as the two most important skills for their prospective job training. Such perceptions indicate that students feel prospective employers would place greater emphasis on employees' speaking and listening skills when assigning tasks or activities at the workplace.

The interview sessions revealed that this perception was prevalent among many respondents who stated that they would be required to carry out job duties involving speaking and listening skills in English in their future careers. Some of the examples of the duties cited from them were having discussions with clients, giving information, explaining about products and entertaining customers. Most of the participants admitted that English is important for developing communication skills in the marketing fields because it helps in understanding customers' demands, helps to further develop communication skills, and help in expanding the market from the domestic to an international level. This is also to show that the marketing executive is a knowledgeable person; able to explain to customers about products; can attract more customers; can reduce language barriers and to show a positive representation for the company.

Essentially, the use of oral communication skills during industrial training will indicate the effective speaking skills that are regularly used in their daily interactions and when dealing for different purposes in a variety of situations at the workplace. The language forms and functions that were taught were contextualized in the sense that the language items and the corresponding skills were taught in relation to the

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specific situations faced by the trainees at their workplace. There are six themes identified based on the interviews and they on knowledge of how to deal with superior, disseminate information, market and sell products, telemarketing, and providing customer service. Among the comments identified based on the interviews are:

- ***Give knowledge on how to deal with superior***  
(“...ada juga memberi kemahiran kepada saya untuk berkomunikasi dengan orang atasan...”)
- ***Disseminate information***  
(“...bantu dalam memberi info kepada pelanggan... yang tidak faham BM”)
- ***Marketing products***  
(“...berkomunikasi dalam bahasa inggeris semasa membuat jualan di Telekom...”)
- ***Telemarketing***  
(“membuat telemarketing kadanga-kadang guna BI... pelanggan guna BI”)
- ***Customer service***  
(“... guna BI masa jumpa customer atau masa customer call tanya pasal product”)  
(“solve problem of customer”)  
(“answer telephone calls”)  
(“handling customer complain”)
- ***Selling products***  
(“...banyak guna masa jual produk”)

It can be observed that the trainees had fair knowledge of how to express their satisfaction with the current oral communication skills during their industrial training. This can be supported by the data from table one that the trainees believed that they are at Elementary level (M=1.732), High intermediate (M=2.395) and lower intermediate (M=2.242). It may very well be that these trainees are those who have lesser or no problems in accomplishing tasks given to them during their industrial

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training as they have fair English proficiency especially in oral communication.

On the other hand, the oral communication skills that the trainees thought that they need to improve and further develop after industrial training were firstly with the highest mean; making public statements or acting as spokesman (M=2.176). The majority of the students were quite confident that they were ready to use oral communication in English in their future jobs but that they felt they needed to improve in listening and understanding lectures during in-house training (M=2.080), entertaining and other social purposes (M=2.063), dealing with native speakers (M=2.059) and responding to telephone calls (M=2.042).

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<b>Communicative Activities</b>	M	SD
<b>Skill: Listening</b>		
1) Listening to the telephone – enquiries from customers	2.139	0.804
2) Listening to complaints by customers	2.233	0.868
3) Listening to instructions by your superiors – managers, executive or head of department	2.535	0.959
4) Listening and understanding lecturers during in-house training	2.372	0.787
5) Listening and understanding contests during a meeting	2.186	0.823
<b>Skill: Speaking</b>	2.163	0.754
6) Dealing with customers – explaining, demonstrating, procedural	2.069	0.798
7) Responding to telephone calls	1.884	0.697
8) Attending to complaints	2.186	0.764
9) Giving information – queries, explaining features and benefits	2.139	0.804
10)Replying messages	1.833	0.729
11)Giving instructions to colleagues	2.023	0.897
12)Participating in meetings	2.024	0.841
13)Entertaining and other social purposes	1.927	0.818
14)Dealing with native speakers	1.878	0.748
15)Making public statements, acting as spokesman	1.975	0.733
16)Participating in in-house trainings – expressing opinion, providing feedback to the facilitators		
<b>Priorities in Communicative Activities</b>		
<b>Skill: Listening</b>	1.837	0.687
17)Listening to the telephone - enquiries from customers	1.815	0.652
18)Listening to complaints by customers	1.937	0.716
19)Listening to instructions by your superiors – managers, executive or head of department	2.080	0.813
20)Listening and understanding lecturers during in-house training	2.200	0.707
21)Listening and understanding contests during a meeting		
<b>Skill: Speaking</b>	1.909	0.765
22)Dealing with customers – explaining, demonstrating, procedural	2.042	0.690
23)Responding to telephone calls	1.926	0.675
24)Attending to complaints	1.866	0.681
25)Giving information – queries, explaining features and benefits	2.000	0.745
26)Replying messages	1.778	0.732
27)Giving instructions to colleagues	1.941	0.747
28)Participating in meetings	2.063	0.680
29)Entertaining and other social purposes	2.058	0.658
30)Dealing with native speakers	2.176	0.528
31)Making public statements, acting as spokesman	2.000	0.632
32)Participating in in-house trainings – expressing opinion, providing feedback to the facilitators		

TABLE: EMPLOYEES' LANGUAGE NEEDS

The results from the structured interview sections with the employers showed that most of the employers felt that the trainees were mostly at intermediate level. The

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trainees have self-rated themselves and this resulted in high intermediate (M=2.395), lower intermediate (M=2.242) and elementary (M=1.732). Therefore, the perceptions of the employers and the trainees are similar in terms of the oral communication ability.

In addition, the business world is becoming very competitive and makes job performance measurement very transparent. Proficiency in English oral communication, the ability to present ideas, explain issues and problems, to speak in a constructive manner, to resolve problems, to understand issues and problems faced by costumers and to come up with workable solutions to problems; are all required to do work immediately and without further training (Cox and King, 2006). Therefore, during the industrial training, the employer's perception in relation to the ability to perform well they suggested the trainees need to improve their communication skills particularly in negotiation skills, public speaking and vocabulary. The employers also perceive that these trainees need to have good oral communication skills in order to perform in the current training environment. Some of the perceptions given by the employers during the interview sections are:

*“good oral communication skills in English is needed to expose themselves in the real-world training at work place” and “ good oral communication skills will help the trainees to understand how to involve in resolving problems with customers and make good explanation on products”.*

This indicates that trainees who are not ready to use English oral communication and feel that they are not confident about using English should start improving their English language proficiency so that they can be more confident when using English for communication at their future workplace.

## **CONCLUSION**

There should be efforts made to minimize the gap between employers' and trainees' perceptions by having employers and educational institutions working hand in hand in projects, assignments and giving career talks by organizations to better prepare

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graduates to fulfill employers' expectations. Throughout this study a great deal of emphasis was placed on the perceptions of trainees who had directly entered the workforce and overall employers' perceptions concerning the basic oral communication skills that the graduates possessed. A similar study should be conducted in the future with graduates and respective employers to see whether graduates are able to fulfill the employers' needs from time to time. Furthermore, the perceptions of employers may vary with the type of work experience and environment.

The results indicated that there are areas that need to be improved in order to ensure trainees are employable in the future. Graduates must be exposed to the real-world working environment. Employers said during the interview section that "opportunities should be given from time to time to the students on what is happening at the workplace so that they will be prepared with sufficient input of the language used". This study indicates that English oral communication skills are a necessary tool for the marketing students to perform well at their future workplace. Therefore, institutions should consistently get input from the stakeholders to evaluate and improve their curricular in their attempts to enhance their students' language performance at the workplace and to fulfill the needs of the stakeholders.

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