

The 8th International Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) Seminar - Aligning Theoretical Knowledge with Professional Practice

## English Language Oral Communication Needs at the Workplace: Feedback from Human Resource Development (HRD) Trainees

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### Abstract

The most essential skill that employers look for is the ability to speak effectively in English. This ability is especially true of sectors, namely the Human Resource Development (HRD), where communication at the internal and external level is an important requirement of the job. Previous studies in Malaysia have found that members of staff often face problems such as speaking fluently and presenting in front of a large audience. This paper reports on an investigation of English Language Oral Communication (ELOC) needs of HRD undergraduates from a public university in the Southern part of Malaysia. The findings identified the specific oral communicative events and skills required by HRD trainees at the workplace.

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*Keywords:* Needs Analysis; Oral communication; ESP, Communicative Events; Human Resource Development

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### 1. Introduction

The role of English language is important for communication between people especially in higher institutions and businesses in Malaysia. Since English is the second language in Malaysia, the concentration is on generating learners with the ability to communicate effectively in different social and professional contexts. Currently in Malaysia, communication skills play the fundamental role at workplace situations. The importance of communication skills is significant in the management sector as stated in different job advertisements. Without efficient communication skills in the management sector, a manager would never achieve success [15].

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According to Clagett [3], in communication, the most important area is oral communication skills in English language which all graduates should possess to guarantee that they can function efficiently at the workplace. Realising that this critical soft skill increases graduates' employability, higher institutions in Malaysia are gearing their efforts toward improving the oral communication skills of their undergraduates.

In the context of workplace communication, having good communication skills is the way to success and that good communication skills are seen as fundamental and an additional advantage [9]. In the perspective of Stivers [14], oral communication skill in English is an important skill for managers to possess in order to carry out tasks efficiently at the workplace. In a study by Kasim and Ali [5], the significant role of oral communication skills in multinational companies was reported by between 71 to 80 percent of the respondents. They ranked the usage of oral communication skills in multinational companies as follows; telephone conversation, informal work related discussions, meetings, giving oral presentations, explaining and demonstrating to subordinates and other colleagues. Higher Institutions in Malaysia are seeking to generate creative managers in different fields to meet the needs of thriving resources in various situations. In fact, at present, one of the key objectives in Malaysian higher institutions is to generate large number of graduates with high ability to communicate effectively at the workplace [10]. To achieve this goal, higher institutions are attempting to design language programs with a focus on communicative skills.

In recent years, the importance of equipping employers with good oral communication skills in English has grown with the demanding nature of current workplace communication. Stevens [13] reported that employers believed that a low proficiency language skill was a difficult factor for employment. He also maintained that many students with low proficiency English language skills cannot be employed because of clients' expectations. In the workplace contexts, employees need oral communication skills in English language to be successful in their jobs as they must carry out different communicative tasks such as presentations, meetings and negotiations. According to Blair and Jeanson [1], a high proficiency in English language, especially in oral communication skills would be valuable to solve different problems that take place in workplace situations. Unfortunately, according to Smith [12], despite the professional and formal training given to students and graduates, there is still a skill gap in workplace situations. It is mentioned that there are significant gaps between the expectations of industries and what the universities offer to the students.

HR management is one of the in-demand sectors of management in Malaysia. Traditionally, HRD officers execute the organizational purpose of an organization; for instance, drafting, interviewing and hiring new staff [5]. However, since the role of English as the global language or lingua franca in both multinational and many local companies in Malaysia has increased dramatically, HRD officers now must be able to communicate effectively – more so than what was expected of them in the past – both inside and outside the workplace. Thus, HRD employers find themselves in circumstances in which the ability to communicate well is crucial in order to function effectively at the workplace. Furthermore, according to MacNamara [8], HRD related work involves a variety of activities. The main activity involves making decisions on the needs of the company; for example, whether to use independent suppliers or hire employees to fill these needs; and also to convince personnel and management practices to keep to a variety of systems. In addition, the HRD sector also supervises the companies' approach to employee settlements, compensations, employee records, and personnel strategies [8].

Kassim and Ali [5], however, reported that many staff, including those in the HRD sector, face problems in communicating well in English and often encounter problems speaking fluently in meetings, delivering public speaking and giving oral presentations. The aforementioned study was conducted on HR multinational companies in Malaysia to examine their English communication needs. The findings of the study highlighted the need for graduates to equip themselves with oral communication skills to ensure that they can function effectively at the workplace. Previous discussions have shown that communication problems at the workplace are related to low proficiency in English language [13] and the skill gaps between the expectations of industries and what the universities offer to the students [12]. The problems faced by existing staff in multinational companies [6] include difficulty in expressing views and ideas at the workplace by nonnative speakers of English. Therefore,

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