IRBAS www.irbas.academyirmbr.com October 2015
International Review of Basic and Applied Sciences Vol. 3 Issue.10

Needs Analysis on the Importance of English Language Skills for Workplace: Trainee Architects

P. THIVILOJANA S.PERINPASINGAM
Taylor's University, Malaysia
Email: pthivilojana@taylors.edu.my, lojana.sp@gmail.com
Tel: 03 56295000

NALINI ARUMUGAM
Academy of Language Studies University Teknologi MARA
Shah Alam, Selangor Malaysia.
Email: nalini@salam.uitm.edu.my, nalini_2130@yahoo.com
Tel: +0355442448

XAVIER THAYALAN
Academy of Language Studies University Teknologi MARA
Shah Alam, Selangor Malaysia
Email: xavier.thayalan@salam.uitm.edu.my
Tel: +60355442448

MAHENDRAN MANIAM
Dept. of English language Faculty of Languages and Communication
Sultan Idris Education University 35900 Tanjong Malim
Perak Darul Ridzuan, Malaysia
Office - 05 4505380
Email: mahendran.maniam@yahoo.com

Abstract

A competitive employment market requires good communication skills in workplaces. In this era of globalization , good communication skills especially in English language play an essential role in securing a job. Students, who undergo internship, need English language as an academic and professional vehicle of communication at work scenarios. These students are cross-trained in report writing, verbal presentation and administrative aspects of their duties and as such, requirement of certain English language skills to carry out duties and responsibilities is necessary. In light of this, study was carried out to examine this communication needs of trainee architect. A quantitative methodology was employed to gauge the language skills frequently used at the workplace. The study revealed that the trainees need more emphasis on spoken and written discourse. The results also indicated a need for a course-design for architects by providing useful information, genre based approach to the discipline and expressing relevant scientific-technical for these trainees to carry out their duties effectively. Recommendations for course-design are further discussed.

Key Words: *Employability, Language Competence, Communication Skills, Workplace Requirement.*

Introduction

A competitive employment market requires good communication skills in workplaces. Workplaces need good communication skills especially in English language as it plays an essential role in employment (Erling, Seargeant, Solly, Chowdhury, & Rahman, 2012; Rivera-Batiz, 1990; Shields & Price, 2002) all over the world. Competence in the English language often becomes as a decisive factor in securing a well-paid job (Casale & Posel, 2011; Davila & Mora, 2000; Dustmann & Fabbr, 2003). Carliner (2000) and Leslie and Lindley (2001) reveal that weak grasp in the language may lead to loss in an organization. Thus, it is apparent that good proficiency is needed for one to secure a job, especially in the management team.

This situation is more apparent especially in this era of globalization where English language and borderless labour market force work hand-in-hand (Debrah & Smith, 2002), as employment is available in any part of the world. Being able to communicate proficiently in the English language determines one's future employment (Orbeta, 2002). This paper explores how proficiency in English relates to job opportunities for Malaysian Architect Trainees in Malaysian corporate sector. In other words, this paper investigates the role of the English language proficiency of Malaysian Architect Trainees in a private university. Special attention will be given to what extent competence in English is necessary to execute one's duties effectively during the internship.

Studies (Casale & Posel, 2011; Dustmann, 1999; Dustmann & Fabbr, 2003; Leslie & Lindley, 2001; Lindley, 2002; Schellekens, 2001) have been carried out to determine the on relationship between English language proficiency and its impacts on employment. They reveal that a good grasp in the language has a positive result on earnings. Lindley (2002) explores earning gaps between fluent and non-fluent ethnic male and female minorities as well as the determinants of English language fluency in Britain and highlighted that the average earnings of both ethnic groups of minority in Britain are significantly affected by lack of fluency. Furthermore Kossoudji (1988) suggests that lack in English effects both in earning and occupational mobility. On another note, Schellekens (2001) opines that lack of proficiency in English appears to be a hindrance to secure a higher and a better paid position. Likewise, Casale and Posel (2011) reveal that people who have obtained a tertiary qualification and are fluent in reading and writing skills, gain greatly in terms of earning capacity as well as securing a position in any organization. The objective of this paper therefore, is to find out how Architect Trainees perceive and interpret the importance of English language proficiency during their internship at private sector in Malaysia.

According to Design Council (2005) there is lack of relevance of the lesson taught in classroom and job requirement. It is important to note that architectural English cannot be taught using a similar approach like other linguistic based modules. Learning English for Architectural studies is influenced by several factors namely technical language based on the aim of the programme as well as career related pathways. It is advocated that the knowledge gained from classroom is not transferred to real world setting (Design Council, 2005). This most certainly applies to the study of Architectural English. Dutro and Mooran (2002) too highlighted that architecture students need to learn certain vocabularies and found them to be a great help in their learning process especially for students to gain more opportunities for gaining competence. Unfortunately, English for architects seems the most neglected kind of English for Specific Purposes (Case, 2012). Architects need English for various reasons and the following list on architectural styles and trends suggests the English language needs in the field of architecture (Case,2012).

- Types of building ("old people's home")
- Parts of buildings and particular types of them ("thatched roof", "partition wall" etc)
- Building and decorating materials
- Stages of the process of finishing a building
- Things architects do (e.g. "estimate" and "model")
- Things they use in their job (e.g. "set square"), especially if they have foreign colleagues
- Things other related people use and do, e.g. "lay foundations" and "estimate"

- Vocabulary connected to rules and regulations
- Colours
- Shapes
- Fittings and decorations
- Positive and negative adjectives to describe buildings and people's reactions to them
- Actions that people do in buildings
- Finance related to buildings (e.g. "mortgage" and "rent")

Apart from specific vocabularies, grammar is another crucial language element that needs due consideration. This area was emphasised by Moats (2000), Wong-Filmore, and Snow (2000). For example, time expressions and future tenses are likely to be even more important for architects than for other professionals. Besides, many people tend to use skills – oriented strategies to comprehend their peers and superiors' speech of English vocabulary as pointed out by (Case, 2012). He further cited that proficiency skills base communication such as speaking and corresponding with prospective or actual clients that takes place in the field of Architecture. In addition, Alberta Education (2012) had mentioned that proficiency skill based learning would assist learners to be understood by their counterparts and to get the intended message across in the most efficient manner. If the list above is included in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for architecture syllabus, it will facilitate future architecture students and trainees to adapt to work place requirements besides enhancing communication between future architects and their prospective clients.

Statement of the Problem

Architects play an important role in a nation's development. A broad overview of the architecture profession in this country reveals that English is the primary lingua franca in the higher learning institutions and workplace sector. The growing number of university graduates does not satisfy the demand of skilled workers (Fong, 2004). He also added that employees feel misplaced, under qualified and lack of necessary skills to adapt to a changing labour market. They are stranded as they do not know where to turn for help. Edward (2000) advocate language skills are crucial to meet employment requirement. In the new millennium, architects have to face new challenges whereby they are expected to be more versatile and equip themselves with language and soft skills (Inman, 2006; Esa Samada, 2000). One of the challenges of developing country is the increasing importance on providing service and architecture education fills this gap. Hence, the paper is concerned with investigating language needs for architecture students to execute their duties during their internship.

Research Questions

The present study is based on Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) who defined needs as "target needs (i.e., what the learner needs to do in the target situation) and learning needs (i.e., what the learner needs to do in order to learn)." The focus of this study is an analysis of the target needs of architecture trainees at the workplace. This research attempted to answer the following questions.

1. What are the English language communication needs of Architecture trainee in the private sector?
2. How important is specialised communication skills training in English?

Limitations of the Study

The study was carried out with a sample size of 50 at a higher learning institution. It is recognised that the opinions and suggestions of these were done at one particular private University and it may differ from the perceptions of other architecture trainees' views, in general. The small sample size (n =50) too does not make allowance for any generalisations to the general population of architecture trainees in all private

higher learning institution in Malaysia. Furthermore, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Dudley-Evans and Jo ST John (1998) have mentioned that the top approach for reviewing the target needs of any group of students or workers is to use various techniques like Questionnaires, follow-up interviews, collection of authentic workplace texts, and visits to the workplace.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 121) explain that needs analysis is the process of finding out the "*what"* and "*how"* of a learner in undertaking a course. They stress three aspects of needs analysis and categorise its aims as:

- To know learners as people, as language users and as language learners; to know how language learning and skills learning can be maximized for a given learner group and to know the target situations and learning environment to facilitate appropriate interpretations.

ESP has traditionally been divided into two classified main branches such as English for Academic Purposes or EAP and English for Occupational Purposes or EOP (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Munby, 1978; Robinson, 1991). However, the theoretical framework of the study is based on EOP (illustrated in Figure 1 below).

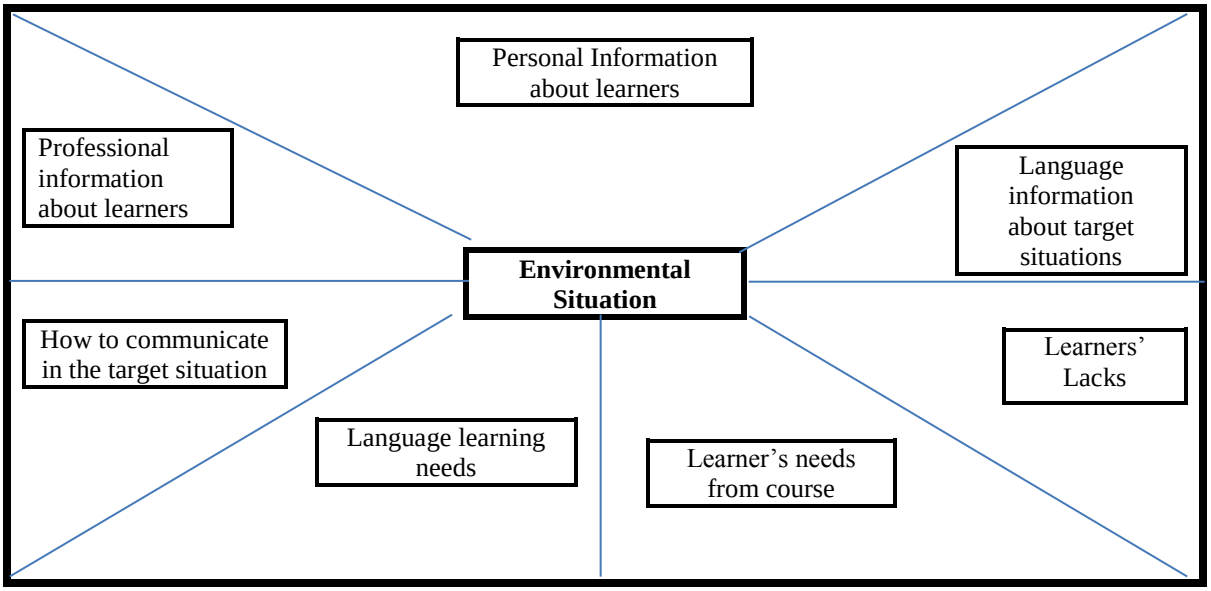

Figure 1: What needs analysis establishes (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998: 125)

This model of ESP needs analysis formulated by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 125) focuses on (1) learners' professional information, (2) learners' personal information, (3) learners' language information about the target situations, (4) learners' lacks, (5) learners' needs from course, (6) language learning needs, (7) communication information in the target situation, and (8) environmental information. These aspects of language needs analysis are defined by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 125) are as follows:

- Professional information about the students: the tasks and activities students are/will be using English for-*target situation analysis (TSA)* and *objectives needs*

- Personal information about the students: factors which may affect the way they learn such as previous learning experiences, reasons for attending the course and expectations of it, attitude to English-*wants, means subjective need*s

- English language information about the students: what their current skills and language use are *present situation analysis* (*PSA*)-this could allow us to assess (D). PSA determines strengths and weaknesses in language skills.

- The students' lacks: the gap between (C) and (A)-*lacks*

- Language learning information: effective ways of learning skills and language in (D)-*learning needs-Learning Situation Analysis (LSA)*

- Knowledge of how language and skills are used in target situation-*linguistic analysis, discourse analysis and genre analysis*.

- Students' needs from the course: what is wanted from the course?

- Environmental situation: information about the environment in which the course will be run *means analysis.*

Research Methodology

The purpose of the study was rather to achieve an in-depth understanding of the complexities of the English language proficiency of Architect Trainees of a private higher learning institution in the labour market, a quantitative case study was considered appropriate. In this quantitative method of inquiry, the aim was to understand how trainee architects sojourners' English proficiency had an impact on their internship in the Malaysian corporate context. The case study was followed as a strategy of inquiry where in-depth explorations of multiple bounded systems (cases) (Creswell, 2007) were adopted through in-depth data collection. Data were collected using questionnaire (adapted from Arumugam & Naginder, 2010), semi-structured (adapted from Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Gardner's (1985)), with trainee architects , instructors (one language instructor and two content instructors). Interviews were conducted face to face. The duration of each interview was approximately 20 - 30 minutes and the language of interview was English. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The questions for interview were open-ended which were related to career profiles of the participants after their internship. A set of questionnaire was to elicit information from sample population of 51 architecture trainees. The questionnaire consists of 5 sections to gather information relating to the respondents' demographic profile, academic qualification, knowledge of the English language, industrial attachment and needs for English language courses and preferences of teaching.

Findings and Discussion

Language Competence

Interestingly, majority of these students stated that the medium of instruction used by their lecturers was English (55%), followed by a combination of English and Bahasa Malaysia (BM) (17.5%), a combination of English, BM and Mandarin (10%), BM only (8%), Mandarin only (8%) and a combination of the three languages (10%). Despite the role of BM as the country's official language, English remains the main language for instruction at colleges/ for tertiary education. The respondents were also asked to indicate if they had attended any other English courses prior to or during their studies. Majority of the respondents (70%), however, did not attend any other courses in English, while those (30%) who did sign up for additional courses stated that they had attended language-related courses such as IELTS, Speech and Drama, Cambridge English Language Course, and English Foundation 1 and 2 at Taylor's University. Despite the realization of the important role of the English language for their future career, the architect trainees did not take extra initiatives to improve their language skills/English language proficiency.

In term of their proficiency level of the English language, both spoken and written skills, most of the respondents rated themselves as having excellent (37.5%), good (32.5%) and fair (30%) command in spoken skill while (45%) good, (30%) excellent, and (22.5%) fair in written English. Only one (2.5%) of the respondents rated herself as weak in terms of writing skills, while none rated themselves to be weak in their spoken English. This depicts that majority of the architect trainees regard themselves as having excellent and good command of spoken and written English.

Table 1. Respondents' perceived level of proficiency

Level of proficiency	Spoken (%)	Written (%)
Weak	0	2.5
Fair	30.0	22.5
Good	32.5	45.0
Excellent	37.5	30.0
TOTAL	**100**	**100**

Table 2. Respondents' Perceived ability to cope with daily tasks

	Ability to cope with daily tasks	Perceived ability (%)			
		Can't cope at all	Can cope but with lots of difficulties	Very few problems	Completely capable
1	Ability to follow and understand conversations in English	1 (3)	0	14 (35)	25 (63)
2	Ability to ask questions & answer queries	1 (3)	4 (10)	13 (33)	22 (55)
3	Ability to speak either face-to-face or over the phone	0	3 (8)	16 (40)	21 (53)
4	Ability to convey/ take down messages clearly	0	2 (5)	12 (30)	26 (65)
5	Ability to explain instructions	0	2 (5)	14 (35)	24 (60)
6	Ability to use architecture terms	1 (3)	3 (8)	17 (43)	19 (48)
7	Ability to read reports on latest development concerning your work	1 (3)	3 (8)	15 (38)	21 (53)
8	Ability to read guarantee letters	0	1 (3)	17 (43)	22 (55)
9	Ability to read & understand general notices/off circulars	1 (3)	4 (10)	15 (38)	20 (50)
10	Ability to write formal letters	0	0	18 (45)	22 (55)
11	Ability to write a clear and coherent report	0	1 (3)	13 (33)	26 (65)
12	Ability to correspond via email	0	2 (5)	11 (28)	26 (65)
13	Ability to conduct a verbal presentation confidently	3 (8)	2 (5)	16 (40)	19 (48)
14	Ability to complete forms and documents	0	0	13 (33)	27 (68)
15	Ability to speak before a crowd	1 (3)	4 (10)	15 (38)	20 (50)

As most respondents are products of Malay medium instruction, it could be speculated that having gone through Mandarin and Malay medium instruction, it must have been very challenging for these trainees to learn English jargon pertinent to the architecture profession. Furthermore, the said group of trainees admitted that they did encounter various hurdles in carrying out their duties in the respective offices during their internship due to their low language proficiency.

The respondents went for their practical training at different companies, with a maximum of three trainees attached at one particular company for internship programmes for duration of three months. It is obvious that English is the major spoken and written language as majority (80%) of the respondents stated that they often used English during their internship period. Slightly over half of the respondents also said they used mainly English when communicating with others outside the firm during their internship. In fact, the respondents indicated that English is basically the main language spoken when they were on duty, communicating with their colleagues when carrying out their duties as well as social interactions.

Importance of English Language to Architect Trainees

As for the language skills, almost all the respondents (87.5%) stated speaking as the most important skill for them, followed by listening, reading, writing, and grammar. It is apparent that the respondents realize the advantages they have over others for being fluent in the English language. To them, having a good proficiency in the English language can assist them in writing reports, giving presentations confidently, avoiding miscommunication, better handling of customers, qualifying for more job opportunities, socializing with others and getting more friends, etc. This finding shows that English is not only crucial for formal tasks, but also for social purposes as most respondents agree that they need to have good writing and speaking skills at their work place.

Need for English Courses and Preference of Teaching

The main objective of this study is to figure out architecture students' needs for English language course and their preference of language teaching. Surprisingly, slightly over half of the respondents (53%) stated that they did not want to have or attend any English language programme at their workplace, while others (47%) indicated the need for language proficiency courses. This seems to suggest that the respondents regarded attending English language courses at their workplace as not necessary. Those who felt the need for a language course reasoned that they needed to improve any aspect on the use of English language whenever necessary, and they required it for knowledge and learning. The Architect trainees' response to this question has revealed that writing and speaking are the skills widely used in the workplace in different situations.

Structured Interview with Instructors

On the contrary to the students' responses, the instructors opined that students did not perform well certain aspects of the language, particularly writing, speaking and grammar. To them, although the students are aware the importance of English to their studies and future career, they still do not see the need for them to use language correctly and confidently. The instructors specifically attribute these problems to their students' lack of reading which has further led to their inability to express their thoughts clearly with appropriate choice of words and usage of correct grammatical structures. This, coupled with the students' shallow thinking and refusal to put in extra efforts to improve their proficiency level, has resulted in their inability to use English well during their internship period.

They also revealed that although students' spoken skills seemed to be moderate, they lack ideas and confidence as well as persuasive language skills to sell their ideas pertaining to their models that they have designed. Besides, they also have a tendency to use informal and conversational tone while preparing their written reports. For example, interpersonal communication skills including, handling telephone inquiries,

composing appropriate and accurate e-mail messages and faxes, report and letter writing and dealing with clients and co-workers in various situations, all are carried out in English. Therefore, their chances to improve their language skills should be focused on the skills of writing and speaking which are most frequently and widely used by them in the domain of work. However, these skills that students lack are not included in the current language modules for the foundation programme as suggested the language instructor. Thus, it is strongly recommended that these skills to be included in the English modules for the foundation programme.

Trainee architects shared that they prefer to have more of listening and speaking skills based courses to prepare them for their workplace. Currently, they undergo general English for them to use in carrying out any activities including their daily tasks or everyday routines. They felt these courses are similar to school system whereby they learn to read and write essays. The university need to tailor courses for them to present projects, writing reports, minutes of meetings based on architecture field. Such exposure will be their life-long learning skills which can be of a help not only during their internship but also when they go to workplace in future.

Conclusion

Proficiency in English therefore, is vital for future employees in order to move forward in both local and international companies and to develop their technical knowledge and skills. It offers a foundation for problem-solving and critical thinking skills that are essential to cope with the swiftly changing environment of the global workplace, one where English plays a vital role as highlighted by Ornstein & Hunkins (1993). One interesting finding of this study is that it highlights the discrepancy between students' perception of their language competency and of their instructor. However, the students also mentioned the importance of English language, particularly speaking and listening, in their daily communication and workplace tasks. These skills can specifically assist them in writing reports, giving presentations confidently, avoiding miscommunication, making them more eligible for jobs, socialising with others and getting more friends. Thus, language courses should put more emphasis on oral and aural skills in order for the university to be able to make these trainees more marketable.

Based on observations and instructors' feedback, it can be concluded that these architect trainees require English language proficiency to carry out their official tasks efficiently. As reflected in the findings, English is indisputably the medium of communication in the field of architecture. These results appear to be an echo of the architect trainees at a private higher learning institution have accepted about their abilities and lacks. They are not only conscious of their proficiency in the language, but they are also capable to identify necessary outcomes about their capability of usage of English language at work place. Therefore, we are in a position to claim that the Architect trainees are still to be in need for more training in the language so as to improve their ability in speaking, writing and listening. The architect trainees consequently must heighten their language abilities and skills not only to provide excellent service but also be able to compete globally as English is an international language. This will lead these trainees towards achieving the country's vision of 2020.

References

Alberta Education. (2012). *Assessment Tools & Strategies. Language Proficiency Assessment*.Retrieved http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/eslapb/documents/language_proficiency_assessment.pdf on 10 February, 2014.

Arumugam, N. & Kaur, N. (2011). Needs Analysis on the Importance of English Communication Skills for Medical Assistants, Journal of Institutional Research South East Asia JIRSEA: Vol. 9, no. 1, ISSN 1675-6061

Case, A. (2012). How To Teach English for Architects. Retrieved on 9th November, 2013. Teflnet. Available at http://edition.tefl.net/articles/teacher/how-to-teach-english-for-architects/

Dudley-Evans, T. & Jo St John, M. (1998). Developments in English for Specific Purposes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Design Council (2005). *The Impact of School Environments: A literature review.* The center for Learning and Teaching School of Education, Communication and Language Science, University of Newcastle.

Dutro, S.& Moran, C. (2002). *Rethinking English Language Instruction. An architectural Approach.* In English Learners: Reaching the Highest Level of English Literacy. Reading Association.

Esa Samad, (2000). Pencapaian Akademik Bukan Kejaminan Kerjaya. Siswa, Julai. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.

Gardner, R. C. (1985). Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation. Suffolk: Edward Arnold.

Gardner, R.C., & Lambert, W. E. (1972). Attitudes and motivation in second language learning. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.

Hutchinson, T. & Waters, A. (1996). English for Specific Purposes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fong, C.O. (2004). Keynote Address at the MEF Conference on Enhancing Malaysia's Competitiveness in a Globalised Environment.

Inman, W. (2006). What are you talking about? Industrial Engineering, 36, 1; ABI/INFORM Global, 36.

Moats, L. C. (2000). *Speech to print: Language essentials for teachers.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Ornstein A.C. & Hunkins F.P (1993) *Curriculum: Foundations, principles and issues*. (2nd ed.). Boston. MA:Allyn and Bacon.

Wong Fillmore, L., & Snow, C. (2000). *What teachers need to know about language*.(Contract No. ED-99-CO-0008). U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Center for Applied Linguistics.