The Realism of English Language Competence for TVET Students in the Tourism Industry

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Abstract:
The basic requisite of employability in the workforce commenced the learning institutions to handle and supervise internship training as component of study plan. Therefore, internship training is one of the necessities for the students to be equipped with the important knowledge and skills related to the workplace and their gained experience. The study was conducted to ascertain the useful English language skills for tourism course which was from the Tourism Management course in Politeknik Sandakan, Sabah, Malaysia. The research was specifically designed to focus on students’ lacks and needs of linguistic skills in order to prepare them for occupational purposes. Good English communication practice during the study will contribute more benefits to students’ education and mastery level. This research was also conducted to investigate whether what the industry needs are aligned to the students’ needs. Therefore, a needs analysis had to be done to recognize the needs of the students and the industry personnel representing the future employers of the students. The researcher sees the importance of needs analysis to be done as only 49.5 % of the polytechnic graduates were employed after they had completed their diploma course (Graduates Tracer Study, Malaysia Higher Education Statistics 2011: 118).

Keywords: language skills, internship training, tourism industry, communication, TVET
1. Introduction

Communicative English (1, 3 and 5) is a compulsory subject that all students in Malaysian polytechnics are to sit for. The primary objective of the courses and targets is the development of human resources. The focus of the course is on students’ actual achievements which bring out change in individuals. Students are expected to be able to sell themselves with their qualifications and soft skills that they learnt while at polytechnic. The Malaysian Polytechnic Division which is the governing body to prepare all the syllabi and provide training and courses to Malaysian polytechnics has worked hard by working hand in hand with the industries and experts in order to set out valuable training for the students in order to achieve its goal of realizing Polytechnic Transformation Plan. All staff whether academic or non-academic staffs have been trained and reminded at every meetings, conferences and courses to work hand in hand in producing marketable candidates for the industry (2011 Annual Report, Malaysian Polytechnic Division :2).

This study focused on the students’ ability of practicing English language during their internship. The central idea of sending them for internship training is to develop their ability to apply academic knowledge, theories, apply English language in business circumstances and proficiency which would help them when meeting foreign industry people. The term “realism” in this research means the practicality and feasibility of the use of English language itself during internship. According to Bisoux (2007) and Posner (2008) as cited in Sahrir et.al. (2016), internship training functions a vital role in grooming students for the real employment world especially in the workplace environment and conducts that are necessary for students with regards to their first hand skill expansion and knowledge which are not gathered during the normal classroom session. Thus, internship training is a course that commonly undertaken by undergraduate students in many tertiary education institutions in the world. Students are required to go through the practical course as part of the requirement of their academic qualification. The prerequisite to accomplish internship training at the undergraduate level is to provide them opportunity in improving their academic knowledge and enhancing their soft skills as well as acquiring extra skills that are highly needed in the workplace after their graduation (Sahrir et. al. (2016). For tourism students, it is very crucial to master the English language at a satisfactory level as they are engaged directly with varieties of social group. It is necessary to find common linguistic proficiency preferences between supply and demand.

1.1 Problem Statement

This study was carried out due to verbal comments from industries to institution training supervisors that the trainees appeared to be struggle during training period due to poor command of language competence. According to Abdul-Karim (2009), internship periods vary from one institution to another and he concluded that an 8-month internship program is successful compared to other periods. Currently, the students were required to complete 24 weeks (6 months) training period as part of their graduation requirement. The researcher would like to analyse as well whether the duration of the training plays role to deepen students’ linguistic performance.
On the other hand, the new policy of the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia requires public learning institutions to prepare graduates to be job creators and not limit them to job seekers only. The achievement of socio-economic objectives appears to depend mainly on the availability of a skilled and easily trainable workforce. Malaysia needs to increase the percentage of skilled workers from 23 percent to 37 percent by 2015 (2011 Annual Report, Malaysian Polytechnic Division: 10). Therefore, technical and vocational teaching and training (TVET) have been carried out widely to achieve the target and upgrade the image of Malaysian polytechnics. Malaysian polytechnics have set their target to supply human capital with first class mentality and employable graduates through quality education and soft skills. This training program is also part and parcel of the institution’s responsibility to furnish students who can face the real workplace experience once they have completed their university studies.

1.2 Research Questions
1. What are students’ lacks in terms of language skills to communicate in English during internship?
2. What problems do students face in using English language during their internship?
3. What language skill is most essential to the students in their internship?

1.3 Conceptual Framework
This research used ESP Reciprocal Model (Ramsa, Nik Intan Baizura, 2012) as the model set the extension of parties in the teaching and learning practice. The main concern of the proposed ESP Reciprocal model like Johns and Dudley-Evans is to advocate solidarity design in the context of ESL training in tertiary institutions. The model engages more consistent models of the area under discussion by adding two more parties; subject specialists and stakeholders. ESP Reciprocal model works as an attempt to replicate more precisely the concreteness of the real situation with all possible links in the practice of ESP and some of the relationships which have not been described in the model.

Figure 1- The ESP Reciprocal Model (Ramsa, Nik Intan Baizura, 2012)
2. Literature Review

This research applied needs analysis procedure as the researcher sees the importance of the language skills for tourism students. Needs analysis is a procedure for discovering and outlining pertinent skills and instructional and administration goals in order to create valuable learning atmosphere that is absolutely related to the real life conditions of the learners. English class teachers and instructors need to know their students’ needs to enable the development of suitable curriculum and more effective teaching and learning (Kaur 2007). Nunan (1998:5, 1996:24) suggested that the jump start for a syllabus outline can be an analysis of the language, information about the learner, beliefs about the learning process itself and a blend of these. Therefore, all courses offered should be based on learners’ need analysis. A central question that needs to be responded is how much time would need to be allocated to language skills, lexicon and subject knowledge acquisition. Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Ouston (1979) wrote that some of the characteristics related with school (institution) efficiency include a better-quality percentage of study time used up on the subject matter of the study. This can be done when the needs of the learners are taken into consideration. In tourism sector, high mastery level of communicative competence plays an important role.

In Malaysia, the fresh graduates are facing diverse of predicaments regarding the employment (Sahrir et.al, 2016). According to Sahrir et.al. (2016) two of the most relevant to the present study is the lack of communication skills and proficiency in English. Employers expect the potential employees to have good communication skills (Harvey et al., 1997, 1999; York, 1999 as cited in Sahrir et.al., 2016). Communication skills not only incorporate the basics such as written and spoken capabilities but also the needs to establish good teamwork through networking besides being updated with the latest technology (Andrews and Higson, 2008). In the case of Malaysia, employability has always been associated with English language proficiency. Graduates from local universities have always been stereotyped as lacking in confidence, communication skills and proficiency (Wahiza, 2012). Other studies suggest poor mastery in English, difficulty in communication and interpersonal skills (Sirat et al., 2004; Pandian Abd Ghani, 2005). Muhammad Amin (2017) investigated the gender based pragmatic competence among students of Tourism Vocational Schools in West Nusa Tenggara province, Indonesia. High unemployment rates among vocational graduates has triggered him to find answer of the problem. DESK INFORMASI (2012) mentioned that the leading contributing factor of the problem was due to mismatch between the vocational graduates’ academic competent and the workplace requirement. This statement was also supported by Mirzaei and Rezaei (2012) that the practice of teaching and learning of English did not supply sufficient language input and practices on pragmatic competences. Muhammad Amin’s (2017) finding of the research reported that students’ pragmatic competence was still low in both receptive and productive skills.

Muhammad Sabri Sahrir, Taufik Ismail and Saiful Adli Shamsul Tajri (2016) piloted a study attempts to investigate the outcome of the internship training program in the
Department of Arabic Language and Literature, at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). At IIUM, language is also the strongest predictor of graduate employability especially with reference to the English language; graduate involvement in training programs offered by the university is also an important predictor apart from grade point average (Sahrir et.al, 2016). Methodologically, this study was conducted to collect the opinions and experience on the internship program among Arabic language and literature students. The participants of the study were purposively selected from 57 out of 66 students who have completed their three months internship training program either in the public or private sector from July to September 2015 by using an online survey and open-ended questionnaire. General findings from this study reported that internship training has essentially improved their soft skills and increased their workplace literacy and well-being. Despite the poor perception of Arabic language in the mutual graduate employability as well as its practicality aspects and job market by the industry, Arabic language and literature students are well accepted in both private and public sectors to undertake their internship training as reported in their article. It was concluded that internship training is important, particularly among Arabic language and literature students as it deepens their experiences, knowledge and skills in both their hard and soft skills. The training itself has also increased students’ level of confidence to explore their future opportunity in the Malaysian job market including setting up their own businesses through entrepreneurship knowledge and skill.

Ramsa, Nik Intan Baizura (2012) conducted a study on English language need analysis of students in the hospitality industry for polytechnic students in a Malaysia educational setting. Her research has involved students from the Hotel & Catering and Tourism Management courses in Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan (PIS), Johor. The main purpose of her study was to find out learners’ language lacks, wants and needs in order to be able to use the language successfully after graduation. She found out that confidence was one of the major factors that contributed to difficulty in using English among students as they were not confidence enough to respond to conversations. She reported that this was due to uncertainty in the use of correct sentence structure and their concerned about speaking with correct grammar. The students had problems especially when dealing with foreigners as they were unable to grasp the linking words. She also added that, lacking of vocabulary among students impeded the conversation process. Instead of that, cultural aspects also brought problems to the students as they were not familiar with the foreigners’ cultural background.

Cowling (2007) studied the needs analysis for intensive courses for the workplace at a prominent Japanese organization. His survey described the stage of needs analysis in designing a complete set of English language materials. The materials are prepared for an intensive training at a giant Japanese industrial firm which has many industrial unit and upholding exchange overseas. Therefore, English was very crucial for engineers and technicians to communicate with foreign investors. The respondents were a group of first to third year staff who would be dispersed to the field in the fourth year. This intensive course then was developed for three days,
three times a year for a period of three years. Hence, all new trainees must finish a total of nine three-day course in their first year at MHI. A few suggested topics such as meetings, business telephoning skills and business presentation skills were topics set to be focused on. Interviews sessions with training section staff, language teachers, target learners and distribution of structured open-ended questionnaire for students to be completed were the instruments used to collect the data for this study. Cowling developed two syllabi; the notional–functional syllabus and the content or task-based syllabus from the data gathered. The results suggested that the syllabus should be able to serve a conversational course where participants could utilize their existing common English knowledge into industry circumstances and supply authentic examples of language. Cowling concluded that needs analysis able to meet the requirements and provided useful English training for the company business workings.

Choi (2005) studied needs analysis of students of tourism English in Korea. She focused on tourism students in Hanyang Women’s College. The main purpose of her study was to find out what students of a two-year college course want to learn in their tourism conversation classes and what ways can help them to achieve better results in acquiring their degree. The study was carried out on three groups of students where questionnaires were distributed in the beginning and the end of the semester. The subjects were 120 students of three regular day-time classes, 40 night class students and 40 working students. The results gathered from the three groups were compared and discussed. Her findings suggested that the focused areas should be included in tourism English training and how they should be trained. In addition, the contents and the teaching methods should be able to clarify students’ lack, want and need in order to equip them for work and become more confident in their English.

3. Research Methodology

This research was a small-scale investigation because it only comprises a small number of students at one polytechnic only. The subjects of the study were only four English lecturers since Politeknik Sandakan only has four English lecturers, ten hotel and tourism company managers/key personnel and 40 students from Tourism Management in Polytechnic Sandakan. The lecturers were experienced lecturers as they already had been teaching five to ten years. The students were similar in terms of their academic performance and they were representative of their courses. Most of the information for the study is obtained through questionnaire surveys and one-to-one interview with selected students and key personnel. According to Nurazzura, et. al, (2014), a questionnaire was distributed to measure the interns’ self-assessment of their knowledge and skills after the internship training programme in order to investigate their workplace knowledge and experiences.

As students need to undergo approximately 24 weeks training, they have to be exposed with both management work and field training. Management work involved preparation of tour packages, ticketing, costing, accommodation booking and transportation and other managerial work. These works need students to apply their writing skills more than other language skills. However, field works such as tour
guiding, promoting and tour package discussion require students to use speaking and listening skills as they were involved directly with the tourists. Here, the researcher noticed the feasibility of the use of the language skills for each task given by the company.

4. Findings

The findings of the study demonstrated that;

1. **All four language skills are required to carry out the job tasks.** However, some skills are found to be more vital than other especially when the students were given tasks that dealt directly with clients or customers, for example, front desk receptionist and tour guiding. The finding reported that most of the students had problems with speaking skills. Most of the problems occurred when students were needed to begin conversation or respond to foreigners. They were getting more nervous and feel uneasy when the tourists speak English language with accents. The respondents were quite unsure about the correct conversation starters. The least needed language skill was writing skill because only senior staff was given authority to prepare reports.

2. In certain circumstances and job scope needs a combination of speaking and listening skills especially when discussing tour packages, giving and asking for direction situations, etc.

3. **Writing skills (note taking skill), listening and speaking** were needed if they were given task to work at front desk as receptionist and discuss tour package or transportation bookings through phone calls.

4. To be successfully communicative in occupational setting, **students must be able to use the particular terminology characteristic of their particular occupational perspective.** Hence, they must have ability to use a more simplified set of academic proficiency such as listening to request and note-taking skills.

5. Students should **know how to distinguish informal or casual talk language and formal talk** to converse effectively, regardless of job-related situations.

5. Discussion

This study exposes the magnitude of conducting the internship training among undergraduate learners as part of their diploma requirements before their graduation. This is crucial for preparing and empowering them with the essential knowledge, experience and skills especially in improving self-confidence, ability to be independent and readiness to face the working world and challenges (Aznan and Rohaiza, 2013). Apart from that, it may improve communication skills and also the needs to establish good teamwork through networking as well as the use of technology such as computer skills (Andrews and Higson, 2008). Cultural aspects should not be ignored as one of the subtopics or themes for classroom activities as it was directly related to students’ challenges that they faced during internship (Ramsa, Nik Intan Baizura, 2012).
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The findings of the study reported that all four language skills are vital to ensure that the tourism students are linguistically competence at the workplace after graduation. They need to boost their self-confidence and polish their pronunciation and listening skills for a smooth two-way communication. They also should familiarize themselves with different kinds of English accents to attend diversity of tourists all over the world. Hence, the English language lecturer must be able to ensure all the skills are integrated in the curriculum by re-design or modify the proposed activities in the syllabus. It was specified by the personnel in the industry that the course should at least involve with one “issue” of business English, such as business telephoning, business presentations, speaking in formal contexts, understanding, and the translation of information and knowledge of specific or technical language of business”. English language courses need to be modified with the course syllabus where reviewing process should be put into practice routinely in order to make required changes that able to sustain outcomes for that particular program or course.

Due to limited number of participants, the sample population is not accurately representative for the whole population of tourism students. The involvement of other institutions which offering similar program might reinforce the consistency of the study findings. In addition, this study only focus on students’ aspects in situational analysis only. The findings might be more comprehensive if the aspects of other facets such as assessments, classroom activities, and teaching materials were also discovered.

This study is important as it gives ideas to the English language lecturers and curriculum developers to prepare a curriculum goals consistent with those reasons needed by the industry. A formal classroom ambience will never be able to prepare students with the complexities, problem analysis and solving involved in the real world of workplace (D’Abate et al., 2009). In Malaysia in particular, it has become crucial nowadays for most of the industry players in the job market to seek potential workers within 1-3 years of working experience which are difficult for a fresh graduate to compete with others who are more experienced (Sahrir et.al., 2016). With the ever changing landscape of the Malaysian economy, Malaysian learning institutions nowadays are facing a tremendous challenge to prepare students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills, along with soft skills required by the industries.

In general, the students believed that the internship training has improved important skills and competencies such as language and communication, soft skills and confidence level through experience gained during a 6-month training program. This internship has also prepared them for real job market (Amin and Nurahmadi, 2017). It is vital to keep abreast with the wants and the demands of the industries in order to protect public trust towards the institution. The results gathered may also be of interest to curriculum developers of Malaysian polytechnics, lecturers and trainers for pedagogical reasons in helping them to develop more effective teaching and learning strategies and materials.

In addition, the students did also mention various positive aspects of the program with some suggestions for improvement mainly for the managerial procedures.
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(Sahrir et al., 2016). Although the overall findings show positive feedback among students with regard to improve soft skills and increased workplace literacy and well-being, the Malaysian Polytechnic English language unit should be aware of suggestions for improvement as mentioned by the learners. Implementing these suggestions will help ensure effectiveness of future internship programs among TVET students especially tourism students.

6. Conclusion

Lecturer must be able to ensure all the skills are integrated in the curriculum by redesign or modify the proposed activities in the syllabus. It was specified by the personnel in the industry that the course should at least involve with one “issue” of business English, such as business telephoning, business presentations, speaking in formal contexts, understanding, and the translation of information and knowledge of specific or technical language of business”. English language courses need to be modified with the course syllabus where reviewing process should be put into practice routinely in order to make required changes that able to sustain outcomes for that particular program or course.

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