

Industry's Needs on Oral Communication Skills among Tourism Students in A Polytechnic

Nurzarimah Jamil, Polytechnic METRO Johor Bahru, Malaysia

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Abstract

As a growing industry, tourism provides tremendous opportunity for students who enjoy working with people. It is important that the tourism graduates develop a strong oral communication skills needed by the industry. The aims of this study are to determine the industry's needs on oral communication skills among tourism students in a polytechnic, to investigate the tourism students' awareness of using appropriate oral communication skills and to propose the oral communication skills syllabus which aligned with the industry's needs. In order to achieve the aims of this study, mixed methods were used in identifying the findings. Quantitative data was analyzed from a set of questionnaire which was designed based on the A1004: English for Commercial Purposes syllabus used by the polytechnic reflecting the oral communication skills needed by the industry. There was also a post evaluation carried out to find out the effectiveness of the new proposed syllabus. Both the questionnaire and the post evaluation were given to the travel agents. Whereas, qualitative data was analyzed from the interviews with the tourism students on their awareness of using appropriate oral communication skills and the pre evaluation comments gathered from the travel agents which was used as a supporting data for the findings. Based on the findings, the importance of each component of oral communication skills according to the industry's needs are indicated specifically and the new proposed syllabus was designed and tested to the students. Interestingly, it was surprising to know that even though the students claimed that they are low proficiency level of students, but they have the awareness of using appropriate oral communication skills. Also, the improvement of the students' performances on using oral communication skills was proved after they were taught on the new proposed syllabus

Keywords

Oral communication skills, industry's needs, syllabus

1.0 INTRODUCTION

English has become an important language in Malaysia as the society starts realizing the importance of the use of English in this new millennium. It is not only the English language that has been a major concern nowadays, but also oral communication skills in order to become competent in communicating with the rest of the world. After all, for Malaysians to be able to compete at the international stage, English oral communication skills are essential to success.

To succeed in any field, the ability to convey or share knowledge and interact with other people is a concern. It was reported that it was vital for graduates to have soft skills like the ability to socialize, and express themselves to complement their technical skills.

In addition, people need to be realistic that being an expert in the content area is not necessarily sufficient as they are required to attend meetings and meet other people as well, where communication happens. According to Salbiah Seliman and Dubois (2002), professionals at leadership level or even at subordinate's level need to communicate with others. That is why the industry needs people with good English communication skills.

At polytechnic level, displaying communication skills is a must and students have no reason not to put on a presentation, as it is part of the coursework assessment. Therefore, students are expected to be able to present well since they have been taught about communication skills during their English lessons. The communication skills learnt are greetings, making and responding to enquiries, invitations, appointments, arrangements, suggestions, social conversation skills, visiting and traveling arrangements and telephone skills (A1004 English for Commercial Purposes Syllabus, 2002). However, it was discovered that not all presentations were successfully delivered. This happened even to students from many courses available at Politeknik Johor Bahru (PJB), especially the tourism students. For instance, it is undeniable that many tourism students do not know how to use appropriate English communication skills to make traveling arrangements during the oral presentation. This causes difficulties for the audience to understand the presenters' ideas. Worse, it also causes difficulties for the English instructors to evaluate the presentation. The situation explained above is not expected in any communication skills presentations since it is essential for the speakers to convey their intended messages effectively to the listeners.

PJB needs to prepare them with English oral communication skills that are aligned with the industry's needs. However, the PJB English instructors do not have substantial information on what oral communication skills do the industry needs from the graduates. It is very important that all tourism graduate students to master oral communication skills since they will be put into practice as a tour operator or guide, dealing with English-speaking visitors, or negotiating with English speakers within the tourism industry.

Thus, this study is conducted to identify the needs of tourism industry on oral communication skills of PJB tourism students. PJB English instructors are aware of the importance of practicing

good oral communication skills among tourism students but as mentioned earlier, they have not been able to identify categorically, on which oral communication skills do the students need to master in order to fulfill the needs of the industry. So far, they just heard informal complaints from the industry on the interns' oral communication performance during the students internship programme with the industry. The complaints were recorded when the lecturers did their field observations to the interns' practical sites.

PJB English instructors are concerned about this problem because the graduates are the product of the institution, thus, it is the responsibility of the PJB English instructors to produce good product, in this context, to produce graduates with good oral communication skills. The tourism graduates use a lot of oral communication in their job scope and it becomes a crucial skill to be excelled in.

Tourism students who study in PJB will have to undergo the English course as one of the requirements, where oral presentation that would reflect the acquired oral communication skills, is one of the components included in the coursework assessment. This requirement should be a great help to students as it will give them exposure and practice on how to communicate effectively. However, many students find this situation stressful as some of them have not even had any chance to appear in front of an audience during their schooling years (Boyer, 1987), or not even sure of the communication skills that should be used in the interaction.

1.1 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To determine the industry's needs on English oral communication skills of PJB tourism students.
2. To investigate the tourism students' awareness of using the appropriate English oral communication skills in their field.
3. To propose to the Hospitality Department the oral communication skills syllabus aligned with the industry's needs.

1.2 Research Questions

The focus of this study is on industry's needs of English oral communication skills for Tourism students of PJB. The study aims to find answers to the questions below:

- (1) Which oral communication skills fulfill the needs of the tourism industry?
- (2) Are the students aware of the need to use appropriate English oral communication skills in the tourism industry?
- (3) How does the new proposed syllabus on oral communication skills helps the industry in fulfilling their needs?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Aitken and Neer's 12 communication competencies that are required by college graduates are competencies to various types of industries. This study is oriented towards tourism industry so the researcher focuses on the communication skills believed to be needed by the tourism students according to the existing syllabus of Malaysian polytechnics. The skills listed in the syllabus are:

1. Greetings and Introductions
2. Enquiries
3. Invitations, appointments and arrangements
4. Clarification
5. Social Conversation Skills
6. Suggestions and Counter Suggestions
7. Visiting and Travelling Arrangements
8. Telephone Skills

These components of oral communication skills served as a guideline during the construction of the questionnaire used in this study.

Tourism graduates, like all graduates, need good English oral communication skills in the workplace. In response to the need, the higher education system in Malaysia strongly encourages communication competency throughout its curriculum by emphasizing the importance of student interaction in all the English courses. Many instructors require student participation and assign a percentage for certain assessments. For instance, the tourism students of PJB have to present role plays on traveling arrangements whereby they have to use appropriate communication skills as part of their group presentation assessment - an approach which demands the students to possess the necessary communication skills.

According to Booher (1994), failure to communicate is the frustration of modern management especially to the jobs that dealing with people. Tourism industry faces the public directly. Spontaneous communication is very crucial and at the same time the appropriate communication skills should be used to ensure success in the industry.

This study is based on one of the perspectives of Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter hypothesis ($i + 1$) that states, learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. Low motivation, low self-esteem and debilitating anxiety will 'raise' the affective filter and form a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition.

In relation with Krashen's $i+1$ Input Hypothesis, Vygotsky (1978) introduced the concept of "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) which is the notional gap between the learner's current developmental level and the learner's potential level of development under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

Viewing the ZPD theory in the context of this study, the researcher sees the students application of using appropriate oral communication skills influenced the employability in the industry of tourism. To overcome the gap between the students' current development and the potential of using more effective and relevant oral communication skills, the students will be asked to perform appropriate relaxing role plays for the pre and post evaluation sessions.

Acknowledging the importance of being able to perform good oral communication skills, this study attempts to determine the tourism students' ability to communicate well while dealing with employers, co-workers and customers through greetings, telephone conversations, discussions on traveling arrangements and other hospitality skills.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher focuses on PJB first semester diploma students from the Hospitality Department majoring in tourism. The researcher looked into the syllabus and course outline of the English subject, specifically the oral communication skills the respondents are using. The researcher also looked into the students' awareness towards appropriate oral communication skills and how are these skills applied during the role-play presentations. This study would also evaluate the existing English language syllabus in fulfilling the industry's needs specifically in oral communication skills. As stated by Minah Harun and Kadir Din (2002), "Although tourist-related programmes have been introduced in this country since the mid-1960s, there has never been a course designed to equip students with communication skills for hospitality purposes until the end of 1998 when a proposal to introduce the course was first tabled for approval at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)."

The researcher uses a variety of research procedures, believing that a single approach to analyzing the needs of students in any context only yields limited data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Since this study focused on needs analysis and a part of it focused on syllabus design for oral communication skills, the researcher gathered the data through the distribution of questionnaires, interviews, pre-evaluations and post-evaluations on students' oral presentation. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the analysis of target needs involves far more than simply identifying the linguistic features of the target situation.

4.0 DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

4.1 Answering the Research Questions.

4.1.1 What are the English oral communication skills that the industry is looking for?

Data from the questionnaire were tabulated using percentages to find out the importance of each component from the existing syllabus. All the travel agents indicated that, the entire oral communication skills components in the existing syllabus are needed in the industry. From the analysis of the questionnaire and the pre-evaluation comments, the researcher came across with recommendations from several travel agents for other skills that they are looking for from the tourism students. Below is the list of the oral communication skills proposed by the industry in order of importance, which are also the skills that they are looking for from the tourism students:

Visiting and Travelling Arrangements

Telephone Skills

Clarification

Invitations, Appointments and Arrangements

Greetings

Suggestions and Counter Suggestions

Enquiries

Social Conversation Skills

New Proposed Components:

Small Talk

Taboo Topics

The researcher also found that all the sub topics from the oral communication skills listed the existing syllabus are important as the entire respondent ranged them “very important” to “somewhat important”. None of the respondents indicate that the sub topics are “unimportant”. Due to these findings, the researcher included the same topics and sub topics in the new proposed syllabus.

4.1.2 How aware are the students with the use of appropriate English oral communication skills in the tourism industry?

All of the interviewed respondents claimed that they are aware of using appropriate English oral communication skills in the tourism industry. Based on the respondents’ responses during the interview, the researcher realized that most of the students regarded themselves as low proficient and still a beginner in this subject matter. This might be attributed to the fact that they were still in their first semester and they felt that they were still new in the institution when the interview was carried out. Although the students felt as such, they were actually aware of using the communication skills appropriately and aware of the importance of acquiring the communication skills in the field of tourism.

In general, all respondents revealed their positive awareness towards using appropriate oral communication skills and realized the importance of the communication skills in the tourism industry.

4.1.3 How does the new proposed syllabus on oral communication skills help the industry in fulfilling their needs?

In order to design the new proposed syllabus, the researcher had to gain data from the questionnaire and the pre-evaluation comments as guidance. The travel agents proposed the skills according to the importance of each component and some of them even proposed new skills to be included in the new syllabus. The effectiveness of the proposed skills by the industry was tested by evaluating the students' demonstration on oral communication skills. As it had been mentioned earlier, the effectiveness of the new proposed syllabus was measured through the rating of the students' oral communication skills evaluated by the travel agents.

Interestingly, during the post evaluation sessions, the travel agents were satisfied with the students' performances on using appropriate oral communication skills. The travel agents rated the students' performances from "very good" to "fair". None of the students were rated "unsatisfactory" and "poor" on the components of communication skills evaluated.

In sum, the researcher found that the new proposed syllabus helped the students to improve their oral communication skills and thus supported the industry to fulfill their needs on oral communications skills among tourism students of PJB.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has highlighted the value of oral communication skills especially among the 1st semester diploma in tourism students of PJB and to the industry of tourism itself. As a tourism student, oral communication skills are very important to be competent in since the industry really in need of the graduates who have the skills. Not only to the tourism industry but the other industries as well.

It would be a wide discussion to be discussed on oral communication skills. Also, it would be a wide researches to be carried out in the future on oral communication skills. As for the development of academic, similar researches could be done to the other group of students from various field of studies. Furthermore, other schools and institutions may also be studied for a similar research as this study.

there are not many researches done locally, in Malaysia on similar study, so, the researcher thinks it would be a good recommendation for Malaysians especially the educators to carry out any researches on oral communication skills

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study implicates the information and knowledge in understanding the industry's needs on oral communication skills among tourism students in a polytechnic. It is hoped that this study could help the students, the travel agents and the institution to collaborate with each other to fulfill the needs of the nation.

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