

Oral Communication Needs Of Mechanical Engineering Undergraduate Students In UTM : As Perceived By The Learners

Yasmin Bt. Hanafi Zaid & Hanim Binti Kamarudin

Fakulti Pendidikan

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Abstract : At present, English is widely used in Malaysia. The used of the language is getting more important especially for workplace communication. However, there has been an issue that many graduates experience problems in communicating in English, thus leaving them unable to secure jobs despite graduating with excellent results. This problem arises due to several factors. This research seeks to identify the specific needs of the learners in learning oral communication skills in English. It investigated the Oral Communication Needs of Mechanical Engineering Undergraduate Students in UTM, from their own perspectives. The purpose of this research is to report findings on these students' needs in learning oral communication in English, both, for present and future needs. Apart from that, it also looks at the problematic areas in English oral communication faced by the students. Questionnaires were used as a means of data collection. The findings of this study showed that oral presentation is the most important skill needed by the students at present, due to their aim to graduate from UTM. The skill concerned with their future workplace communication is in making telephone conversation and finally more than half of the students felt that they do have problems with their communication skills in English.

Keywords : oral communication, mechanical engineering

Introduction

Communication skills simply do not refer to the way in which we communicate with another person. It encompasses many other things; the way in which we respond to the person we are speaking, body gestures including the facial expressions, pitch and tone of our voice and a lot of other things. And the importance of communication skills is not just limited to the management world, since effective communication skills are now required in each and every aspect of our life.

It should be remembered that maintaining good relationships is a way to a healthy lifestyle, and a good relationship can only be maintained by maintaining healthy communication with our near and dear ones. They are the ones we stay with on a regular basis. They are also the ones who see us at our best as well as our worst. Good communication skills help the relationships to develop along good lines, and ensure that arguments and disagreements are kept to a minimum. Good communication will avoid arguments and insults.

Nowadays, communication skills play an important role in workplace. We can quickly assess the importance of communication skills in the business sector when we take a look at job advertisements. There is little chance that you will come across an advertisement which does not mention that candidates should have good communication skills. Perhaps this is the only criteria which create a positive impact when a person goes for a job interview. This is because technical qualifications are likely to be more or less the same among the candidates. Without effective communication skills, a person may find it impossible to climb up the corporate ladder. Promotions come to those who can communicate effectively at all levels, from senior management level to the lowest employee. Given the importance of communication skills in both

the personal and the corporate world, any individual who wants to make progress with their life should develop this important skill.

Statement of the Problem

There has been an issue that many graduates are jobless even though they have graduated with excellent result. This is due to the problem of lack in communication skills, especially to communicate in English. It is vital that graduates have “soft skills” like the ability to socialize, communicate and express themselves to complement their “hard skills” (New Straits Times, 2007). However, some of them are very good technically but they failed to express their ideas. They find it hard to speak in English and have difficulties in terms of the pronunciation, the use of correct grammaticality, and fluency. The worst is when they do not want to try to speak because of their anxiety and fear of making mistakes.

From the researcher’s personal experience, there are companies and organizations which claimed that the graduates could not perform during the interview session and as we all know, the interview is important because it reflects the personality of the applicants. Stevens (2005) stated that employers said a poor language skill was a barrier to being hired, “Many students come to me with poor English skills. I could not hire them because of our clients’ perceptions. Stevens (2005) also added by saying that undergraduate students should be well aware that communication skills are in demand in the workplace. Therefore, the researcher thinks the companies are looking for employees who are not only expert in their own field but can also carry out various tasks and have good oral communication skills. It is because these kinds of employees would be more beneficial to the companies.

Thus, the researcher will conduct this study to investigate the specific needs for mechanical engineering students in oral communication skills. It is hoped that after revealing the result of this study, course designers would design a more relevant materials and activities to meet the students’ needs. This could be related to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach of learning.

Significance of the Study

This study benefits several groups of people in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia such as the lecturers from Modern Language Department, the curriculum designers for Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, and to the students, themselves.

In UTM, the lecturers from Modern Language Department are the people responsible for teaching English courses in all faculties including the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering. This study helped these lecturers in understanding the problems faced by their mechanical engineering students, thus would find ways to overcome the problems in order to produce quality graduates with good command of English.

As for the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, their curriculum designers could design course contents that are related to the students’ needs. This would probably enhance the learners’ abilities to apply their knowledge in real-life situations because they are learning things that are relevant to their field of study. Furthermore, their course contents may include explicit oral communication practice. This will lead to generate mechanical engineering graduates who are more balanced in communication skills and in technical field.

Finally, this study also benefited the mechanical engineering students themselves because it provides a clearer view of their needs and ability in oral communication using the English

language. They could improve their oral communication skills by focusing on overcoming the areas that they have stated problematic to them.

Research Procedure

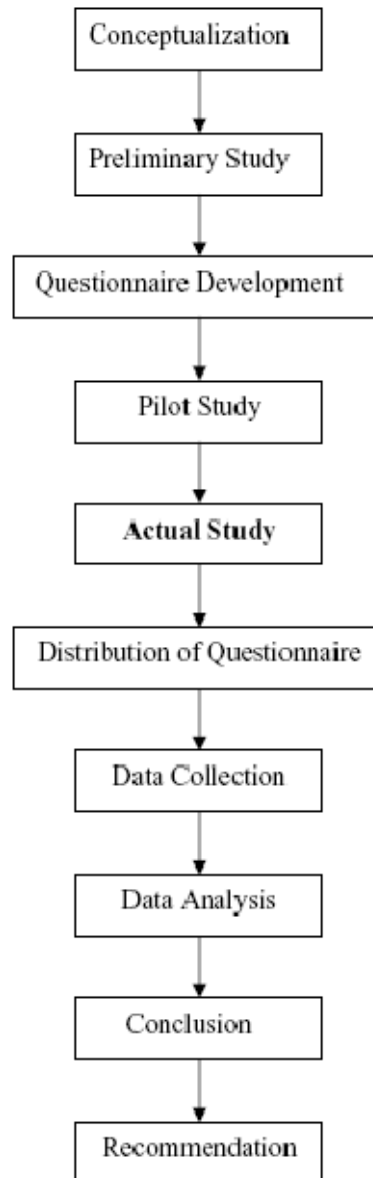


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Research Procedure

Research procedure is a step-by-step process in conducting the study. Figure 1 is a conceptual framework of the research procedure that was carried out by the researcher. The research began with the conceptualization stage where the focus of this study was determined. At this level, the researcher decided the title of the study, the purpose and objectives of it, as well as the research instruments used. Next, the preliminary study was carried out for the developmental of questions for the questionnaire based on the research questions. This takes into consideration the learners' expectation of their English courses specifically in oral communication skills. Then,

there was the process of pilot study before carrying out the actual research. The actual research comprised of distributing the questionnaire to the respondents, data collection, data analysis, followed by the conclusion and recommendation. The diagram in the next page summarized the procedure of this study followed by the detail explanations for each step involved.

Pilot Study

Pilot study is essential so that the researcher could see the flow in carrying out the actual study. From this activity, the researcher will have the opportunity to test the reliability and the validity of the questionnaire items. The researcher was conducting pilot study based on its roles as stated by Punch (2003), which are:

1. Questions need to be tested for comprehension, clarity, ambiguity, and difficulty in responding to. We need to ensure that our data collection questions ‘work’ so that people can quickly, easily, and confidently respond to them.
2. The whole questionnaire needs to be tested for length, and for time and difficulty to complete.

At this phase, the questionnaires were distributed to the mechanical engineering students but they are not the actual population. There were only twenty students from Faculty of Mechanical Engineering involved and they were chosen randomly from first year to final year students.

Research Instrument

The researcher was using the self-administered questionnaire as the research instrument (Appendix C). The questionnaire was designed to obtain the students’ needs in oral communication skills as well as to support the findings from secondary data that researcher collected from reading materials such as books, newspaper articles, journals, etc.

Varieties of question types were used in the questionnaire. They included the close-ended, open-ended, yes-no, and ranking questions. The questions comprised of the students’ present and potential future needs of oral communication skills in English, and the problems that they may encounter in communicating.

Respondents of the Study

At this point, the researcher has to bear in mind about the concept of “anonymity”. Anonymity refers to the confidentiality of the respondents’ background (Oppenheim, 1992). For instance, they should be given a guarantee that their background information is not mentioned. This is done to make sure that they are answering the questions in the questionnaire honestly. The respondents of this study were the final year students from Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (4 SMM), which undergo the four-year degree program.

Data Analysis

The table below shows the techniques that the respondents used to practise their oral communication skills in English. It shows that 84.51 percent of the respondents practised speaking in English using classroom oral presentation, whereas 63.38 percent others practised by socializing. The other 35.21 percent students used academic discussion as a way of practising their English oral communication skills.

Table 1 Ways the Respondents Practices their Oral Communication Skills in English

Ways of Practicing to Speak English	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Socializing	45	63.38
Classroom oral presentations	60	84.51
Discussing studies	25	35.21
Others	27	38.03

There are 32.39 percent of the respondents which represents 23 students stated that they practised communicating in English by listening and singing English songs. From the researcher's opinion, using songs to practise English communication is good since we could acquire the language naturally. The students can learn pronouncing the words through listening to the lyrics of the songs and then singing it as the way to practise their pronunciations. According to Murphey (1992), the most common reason that the ESL teachers have to take songs into their classes are:

- to encourage intensive and extensive learning,
- to stimulate the discussion of attitude and feelings,
- to encourage creativity and use of imagination, and
- to make internal association with people, places, and times in our lives.

This shows that using songs do benefits in practicing English communication.

Next, there are also 5.64 percent respondents (4 students) who practised to speak English by correcting their pronunciation using computer software. These figures are shown in Figure 4.2 below.

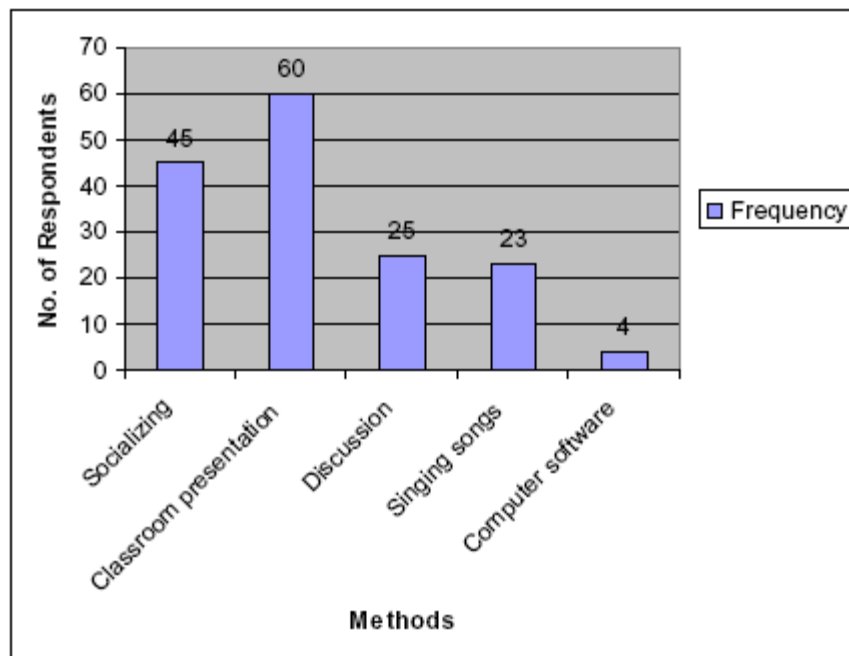


Figure 2 : Frequency of Ways to Practise Speaking English

The respondents think that classroom presentation is one way of practising their communication skills because it is a formal way of speaking. Therefore, they are forced to speak in full sentences using proper language. They would also attempt to avoid making mistakes because there will be marks given by the lecturer based on their presentation.

Table 2 Potential Future Needs for Workplace

Activities/Responsibilities	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)	Frequency
Making telephone conversation	40	56.34	Often
Delivering a speech	37	52.11	Often
Giving instructions or briefings	36	50.70	Often
External meetings (with clients)	34	47.89	Often
Doing presentations	31	43.66	Often
Internal meetings (with staff)	30	42.25	Often
Participating in seminars	26	36.62	Often

As shown in Table 2, most of the respondents which are 56.34 percent of them (40 students) think that they will need to make a lot of telephone conversation in future. This is in contrast with the research done by Yasmin (2003) that telephone conversation is considered as the least important skills need to be acquired. From the researcher's point of view, the sample of Yasmin's research which is the Polymer students from Faculty of Chemical Engineering put higher importance to the skills that are needed in their studies. Therefore, they do not see the importance of involving in telephone conversations.

Next, the respondents chose delivering a speech as the second important activity that they will need to accomplish in their workplace (52.11 percent), followed by giving instructions or briefings (50.70 percent), involved in external meetings (47.89 percent), doing presentations (43.66 percent), involved in internal meetings (42.25 percent) , and last but not least is participating in seminars (36.62 percent). The tabulation has been presented specifically in Table 2.

From the researcher point of view, the students think that they will need to make telephone conversation because everything starts with a phone call. For instance, to set a date for appointment and meetings, people normally will make a phone call first rather going directly to the company.

This is followed by delivering a speech. Here, speech is important for workplace communication when there are ceremonies at the company. These include when a person needs to deliver a speech for his promotion, for retirement, as well as when a manager has to give a speech during the annual dinner of the company.

Thirdly, giving instructions or briefings. Most companies have briefings like morning briefing and weekly briefing that normally being carried out on every Monday. During this

briefing, the issues being discussed include the progress of the company's projects, new projects, and other problematic issues of the company such as unsettled matters. By doing so, the staffs will know their goal of the day or they will know what they have to achieve by the end of the week.

Next, the students also think they will have to attend external meetings. This is a meeting where they have to represent their company to deal business with other companies. The meetings will discuss matter including new business opportunity or the progression of their projects. Other than dealing with national companies, the respondents also may deal with international companies and it is very important for them to communicate in English language since it is regarded as the international language. This is supported by the deputy chairman of State Industrial Development and Tourism Committee, Datuk Nasir Ibrahim said that "good English communication skills will give a good first impression about the people and state" (New Straits Time, 2007). Therefore, by having good communication skills in English, there will be an opportunity to expand the business.

Presentation is the other activity that the students think they have to perform in their future. For example, they have to present paper work to their boss and colleagues before presenting it to clients. During the presentation, the presenter should have the ability to defend his ideas and should be judicious in answering questions from the audiences

The students also think that they have to attend internal meetings of the company. At this meeting, the discussion will be on solving problems, the projects' progression, division of tasks, and other internal issues of the company.

Last but not least, the respondents agreed that they have to participate in seminars. During the seminars, there will be a lot of group discussion and teamwork involved. Therefore, they should be able to communicate in English in order to accomplish all the tasks.

Discussion

The following conclusions can be drawn based on the findings of the study. To begin with, this study has shown that classroom presentation is the most needed skills in the respondents' academic studies. This was supported by Yasmin (2003) in her research on oral communication needs that the lecturers' perceived oral presentation is crucial and predominant to the students' needs. This gives an idea that the lecturers want the students to excel in their academic studies as well as be well prepared for their future career as engineers, because they have to do presentations at workplace. This is in line with the concept of ESP to promote teaching and learning activities which would be meaningful and cater the students' needs (Khairi Izwan, 1995).

Secondly, this study revealed that making telephone conversation is considered as the most needed activity by the respondents in their future workplace communication. This is in contrast of what has been presented in Yasmin's research (2003) that the students perceived making telephone conversation is not an important skill. This possibly because in the research done by Yasmin (2003), the chemical engineering students put higher importance to the skills that are needed in their studies. Therefore, they were only aiming at finishing their studies first, whereas in this research the respondents seem to be more aware of the skills that they need at the workplace.

Finally, most of the respondents admitted that they are still weak in certain areas of communication. This is mainly in pronunciation and lack of confidence to communicate. The respondents might have problems in pronunciation possibly because of their first language

interference (Brown & Yule, 1983). Next, there are several factors that could be focused to develop the confidence level in speaking such as handling errors correction judiciously, as well as provide friendly and relaxed situations to communicate.

As in other studies, this study is not without its limitations. Due to the reason that this research was conducted specifically to the fourth year mechanical engineering undergraduate students (4 SMM), the findings were only true for this group of students and cannot be generalized to other students. Further study needs to be conducted to other groups of students. Other than that, the means of collecting data also could be varied such as using interviews and observations.

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