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

Establishing the Construct of Workplace Written Communication

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Abstract

This paper explores our attempt to determine the construct of workplace written communication through a study involving graduating students and workplace professionals. Information regarding written tasks, minimum standards and quality expected from new graduate employees were gathered through interviews of human resource personnel from various fields. Based on the information gathered, a test of written communication was designed and administered to a group of sixty graduating students. The end products were collected, from which five were selected, believed to be representative of the product of the 'good', 'satisfactory', 'modest', 'weak' and 'very weak' writers. The scripts were then shown to the human resource personnel for assessment. Results were analysed to establish the different categories of criteria applied by the professionals in their assessment. From the analysis, the construct of workplace written communication was devised and subjected to validation.

Keywords: written construct; minimum written requirement; criteria of assessment

1. Introduction

Accurate measurement of workplace language and communication ability has become an increasingly complex undertaking, mainly for two reasons. First, is the complexity of specifying that ability and distinguishing it from other abilities that may affect measurement and interpretation of the test scores [1]. Second, is the intricacy of developing appropriate instruments to measure that language and communication ability? Based on

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the above mentioned difficulties and in the context of graduating students who will be joining the job market, a number of issues needed to be addressed. How do we, academics, determine that construct of workplace language and communication ability? How do we measure it? These are real problems, and deserving real solutions. An issue arising from this predicament is from whose perspective should these concerns be addressed? Should it be from the perspective of the academics' or the employers'?

Studies over the years have identified two approaches at defining and measuring the construct. First, the Real Life Approach which addresses the issue of language use as it is applied in real life contexts. In this approach, the requirements of real-life language use and its domains are identified and required distinct scales of abilities are differentiated according to levels. In the case of engineers working in an electronics assembly plant, for instance, what language ability do they need to have for effective communication with other engineers, technicians, plant supervisors, department managers, suppliers and clients? What language forms do they need to equip themselves with to match the expectations of appropriate and correct use of language for the various work events in which they are engaged in? Second, the Components Ability Approach which addresses the issue of distinctive skills needed for effective and successful performance of specific tasks. The Canale and Swain Model [2] claims that a person is said to be communicatively competent if he has within his language repertoire, sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of the way language is shaped by cultural conventions in particular communities), linguistic competence (control of the linguistic system), strategic competence (ability to cope communicatively if one's linguistic resources are inadequate) and discourse competence (knowledge of how texts are organized in speech and writing) to match his specific purposes for communication. Bachman [1] further developed the model, distinguishing three components of language ability, namely, language competence, strategic competence and psycho-physiological skills. The adoption of either approach, however, has its limitations. In the Real Life Approach, since the students have yet to join the job market, they lack the experience and abilities needed for effective performance in the workplace; thus any measurement of expected abilities may be deemed inaccurate. In the Components Skills Approach, since the expectations are viewed from the academics' perspective, they may be unrealistic and its adoption may not meet actual skills needed for performance of tasks in the workplace, and this again may result in inaccuracy of measurement.

Based on the above scenario, two important considerations have prompted us to conduct the study. First, the critical need to know the employers' expectations of graduating students' communicative ability in light of the graduating students' effective participation in the workplace environments. Second, the urgent need to develop valid instruments that can accurately measure the true communicative ability of the graduates when they enter the job market. In this paper we attempt to identify and describe one particular component of that workplace language and communication construct, namely, the written construct. First, we review the role of workplace written language and communication; next, we discuss the process and procedures that we have adopted to determine that written construct; and finally, we present our proposed construct of workplace written language and communication for feedback and suggestions. Two research questions have been formulated in our attempt to establish the workplace written language and communication construct. They are:

Research Question 1: What criteria do employers adopt when evaluating the quality of written output?
Research Question 2: What is the minimum level expected for acceptance of completed tasks in the workplace?

2. Workplace Written Language and Communication

Written communication has a role in organizational processes. Texts, such as reports, contracts, memos, signs or work orders have important roles in performing or causing actions. They participate, like other agents, in the daily production of organizational life. Attan [3] noted in her study of how written texts have helped shape the process and procedures for participants' assembly of car audio components in a Japanese multinational electronics assembly plant through work manuals, daily reports, technical reports, rework reports and trouble-

shooting reports. Additionally, texts in the form of signs, notices, posters, brochures and pictures are also being shaped by the work culture of an organization as shown in employees' internalization of shared values, beliefs, norms, thinking and expectations. For all these to be effectively conveyed in the texts, clarity of expression, correct language and specificity of message are emphasized [4].

The importance of language and communication skills for those seeking to gain employment is well documented. In media advertisements, advertisers go as far as pointing out specific languages and communication skills expected of prospective employees; for instance, good interpersonal skills, leadership quality, high proficiency in the basic communication skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing, preferred high proficiency in English, good command of a third language an advantage. These skills have been variously labelled by scholars, namely, soft skills, non-technical or employability skills. Robinson [5] termed these employability skills which are basic skills necessary for getting, keeping and doing well on a job and they can be divided into three categories: Basic Academic Skills, Higher Order Thinking Skills and Personal Qualities. To Zinser, [6] employability skills include managing resources, communication and interpersonal skills, teamwork and problem-solving and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. To Bush and Barrick [7] employability skills include personal values, problem-solving and decision-making skills, relations with other workers, communication skills, task related skills, maturity, health and safety habits and commitment to job.

Several studies, in the Malaysian context, have found correlation between employees' communication skills and their superiors' perceptions of their job performance [8; 9; 10; 11]. In a study by Ismail, R. et al [12] of public and private sector employers' perceptions of economics graduates, it was reported that personality was viewed as the most important criterion when hiring workers, followed by communication skills. In contrast, academic performance was ranked eighth out of twelve criteria in importance [13]. In another study, oral and written communications were ranked first and second, respectively, in respect of employers' perceptions of what makes graduates marketable [8]. Similarly, in another study by the Central Bank of Malaysia, in 2002, it was revealed that there is wide disparity in the command of basic skills of spoken and written English, initiating skills, technical knowledge and problem-solving skills between the local and foreign graduates. Locally-trained graduates were found to be inferior in comparison to their foreign-trained counterparts, especially in both communication skills and English Language oral skills [13].

Despite the importance placed on communication skills and the English Language, significant deficiencies in employees' communication skills are noted. A local daily reported that various surveys on graduates' employability have found English as the graduates' main weakness. This was further substantiated by reports from the Malaysian Employers' Federation that the poor standard of English among graduates was the main complaint by employers [14].

3. Process and Procedures in Determining Graduating Students' Workplace Written Communication

The project started off with a preliminary phase followed by a four-phase stepladder procedure adapted from a previous study by Abdul Raof [15]. The four-phase procedure consisted of the Test Design Phase, the Sample Ranking Phase, the Interview Phase and the Drafting Phase. The four-phase procedure was adopted as its use has been shown to be useful in promoting active and continuous collaboration between two autonomous parties, which in this case involves the test developers and workplace professionals. The preliminary stage involved several rounds of meetings among the test developers involved in the study. The test developers' main aim in these meetings was to deliberate on the nature of the graduating students' written communication construct. Following the discussions, it was decided that a set of interview questions be developed in an attempt to gather preliminary relevant information about the nature of writing in which new graduate employees were required to undertake. The input required include type of written output produced by new graduate employees, length of the written output expected, language of written output, employers' rating of new graduate employees' output,

employers' interpretation of the quality of the written output, level of ability expected in the production of the written output, minimum level of quality expected in the written output and criteria applied in evaluating the quality of the written output. An eight-item interview questionnaire was developed, followed by interviews of a number of professional from various fields of specialisation. (For a sample of the preliminary interview questions, please refer to Appendix A).

Altogether twelve professionals participated in the interview. They held positions such as Executive Director, Head of Unit, General Manager, Head of Section, Head of Department, Director, Manager, Vice-President, Head of Group Communications and Section Coordinator from diverse fields of media, insurance, automotive, ICT, environmental consultancy, investment holding, education, medical, building construction, accounting and IT call centre.

A summary of the findings of the interview is as follows:

(1) Most interviewees reported that new graduate employees were given tasks such as taking down notes, writing minutes of meetings, letters, emails, memos and reports in English. With the exception of the consultancy firm, all written outputs were between one to three pages long. In the case of the consultancy firm, reports can be as lengthy as forty pages.

(2) Nine out of twelve interviewees reported 'satisfactory' execution of tasks by their new graduate employees. On the other hand, three interviewees reported that the new employees' performance were less than 'satisfactory'. In other words the new employees were either 'weak' or 'modest' writers and that they have yet to meet the expectations of their employers.

(3) Many interviewees reported 'satisfactory' performance by their new graduate employees. A 'satisfactory' level of performance, according to them, meant that the new employees adequately met the requirements of tasks assigned in terms of comprehensibility of text, smooth flow of ideas and clear expressions although there may be grammatical mistakes in their writings but which did not impede comprehension.

(4) On level of written output expected, all interviewees reported 'good' to 'excellent' performance of tasks, putting emphasis on coherence of ideas, focus on content, clarity of expression, conciseness of words and accuracy of word choice and sentence structures.

(5) On minimum standards expected, all but two interviewees reported 'good' as their benchmark of expected writing ability. In other words, many organizations set high standards for job performance, and although many new employees' output was considered 'satisfactory' to their expectations, they have yet to fulfill the minimum standard set by their respective employers. The two organizations which did not expect high minimum standards were the IT call centre and automotive industry. In the case of the IT call centre, since the new graduate employees' job involves listening to and answering queries of clients in the oral form, the new employees only needed to have good message taking skill. In the case of the automotive industry, a 'satisfactory' level of work performance was deemed more than adequate.

(6) In determining the quality of the written output, all interviewees reported correct content, good flow of ideas, conciseness and accuracy of words and sentences as the main criteria of assessment.

The information gathered from the interview was analysed and used as a basis for the design of a test of writing (Test Design Phase) aimed at eliciting graduating students' workplace written discourse. As can be surmised from the findings of the interview at the preliminary phase, four broad areas of expected competencies can be discerned in the assessment exercise, namely, 'focus', 'coherence', 'content' and 'language'. Since 'content', 'focus' and 'coherence' are crucial in workplace writing, the intended test to be designed should aim at eliciting the writer's analytical, critical-thinking and reasoning abilities. Additionally, the test should also tap the writer's ability to use appropriate and accurate language relevant to fulfillment of the task. The topic to be chosen should, on the one hand, to generally relate to the workplace, but on the other, to not replicate authentic professional communication as the graduating students have yet to be familiar with the workplace events and practices. This being so as they are still in their final year of study. Apart from that, it is the students' current

proficiency upon entry into the workplace that is to be measured and of concern to us. (For a sample of the Test of Writing paper, please refer to Appendix B.)

The test was piloted and then administered to a group of sixty graduating students. From the sixty scripts obtained, five were selected by the test developers, perceived to be representative of the output of the 'good', 'satisfactory', 'modest', 'weak' and 'very weak' writers. These scripts were labeled A, B, C, D and E and were then shown to a number of workplace professionals involving Human Resource Managers, Public Relations Manager, Managing Director, Technical Manager, Head of Department, Corporate Communications Manager and Deputy Head of Department from diverse fields of education, building construction, forestry, public relations, travel agency and multimedia. These professionals were asked to rank and assess the graduating students' scripts (Sample Ranking Phase) based on their criteria of assessment, as they would have for their in-house assessments in their respective organizations, as it was these assessment criteria that we were looking for. Following the ranking and assessment of the five scripts, each participating workplace professional was then subjected to an interview session. Among the questions asked in the interview were:

1. Which scripts are acceptable to you, and why?
2. Which scripts are unacceptable to you, and why?
3. Why have you ranked the scripts they way they are?
4. What criteria did you adopt in your ranking and assessment? Please elaborate.
5. What criteria are more important to you, and why?
6. What other features would you like to see in the scripts? Please elaborate.
7. Why are those criteria important to you?
8. What minimum qualities are expected in a piece of writing?

Altogether seven interviewees participated in the ranking and assessment exercise. Following are the findings of the interview (Interview Phase):

1.   Which scripts are acceptable to you, and why?

Overall, Scripts E, A and D were regarded as acceptable to most interviewees. Script E was ranked first, five times and second, twice. Script A was ranked first, twice and third, four times. Script D was ranked second, four times and third, once. The reasons given for the ranking were that the scripts displayed maturity and organization of thought, were well focused and had good flow of ideas, application of analytical, critical-thinking ability, good and appropriate vocabulary, accurate use of language, clarity of expression, depth of understanding of task presented, good analysis and evaluation of the situation and task, were concise and conveyed relevant content.

2.   Which scripts are unacceptable to you, and why?

Scripts C and B were unanimously ranked unacceptable by most interviewees. Script B was ranked last, six times while Script C was ranked second last, three times and last, once. The reasons given were that the scripts showed poor response to task, lacked maturity and content, short in length and ideas were loosely and poorly expressed.

3.   Why have you ranked the scripts the way they are?

Script E was ranked top among the five sampled. The writer exhibited sophistication of analysis and evaluation of task and situation was organised in his writing, showed coherence of ideas and maturity of thought, had a good grasp of the English Language and used appropriate and correct expressions, yet was concise. Script

B was ranked last as it fell short of the word count, lacked content and showed no ability to analyse the prompts and the task.

4.   What criteria did you adopt in your ranking and assessment? Please elaborate.   .

A number of criteria were adopted in the assessment ranging from organization, clarity of expression, maturity of thought, coherence of ideas, good vocabulary, depth of understanding, critical thinking, relevant content, good analysis of task and context, focused, concise and to the point, accurate language.

5.   What criteria are more important to you, and why?

The more important criteria were critical thinking ability, good analysis and evaluation of task and situation, coherence of ideas, focused and to the point, appropriate and accurate vocabulary and sentence structures, clarity of expression.

6.   What other features would you like to see in the scripts? Please elaborate.

What was found missing in the test of writing, was the problem-solving element. A number of interviewees reiterated the importance of this aspect as it is through the problem-solving activities that a potential employee's mental capacity and strength of analysis is adequately assessed. In the real workplace environment, employees are confronted with problems that require speedy decision making and solutions provision. This is a skill that should have also been incorporated in the test.

7.   Why are those criteria important to you?

In all organizations, problems abound. The right employees are those who can help solve problems or are able to provide ideas or solutions on how to address daily problems.

8.   What minimum qualities are expected in a piece of writing?

Good analysis and evaluation of task and context, focused attempt at analysis of task, coherence of ideas, relevant content without superfluous details, accurate and appropriate vocabulary and sentence structures.

The responses generated by the workplace professionals were analysed and further discussions were held among the test developers for the grouping of common traits and matching them against the required minimum level of expected performance in the respective workplace. Once a consensus has been reached, a draft construct of the language and communication competence was then determined. Following that, a six-level rating scale for workplace written language and communication, incorporating the criteria of assessments and minimum level of performance expected, obtained from the interviews was drafted. The completed draft rating scale was then shown to the respective professionals for validation.

4. Proposed Construct of Workplace Written Communication Competence

Based on the minimum level of performance expected and the criteria of assessments obtained from the interviews, four clusters of writing abilities are proposed, namely, 'language', 'coherence of ideas', 'focus' and 'content'. The 'language' component includes ability to form sentences; ability to use parts of speech such as articles, prepositions, determiners, verbs and tenses, adjectives, adverbs, vocabulary and technical lexicon. The 'coherence of ideas' component includes ability to formulate ideas and demonstrate their unity in relation to the analysis and synthesis of the given input and context of situation as well as paragraphing and mechanics of writing. In the display of coherence in writing, the writer would have to rely on the 'language' component for the signal words and linkers that help convey connectedness of ideas in writing. The 'language' and 'coherence of ideas' components were further grouped together as one big component and named as the 'Language and Organisation' component.

The next cluster, 'focus', includes ability to address and evaluate the task and the context of situation, analyse, synthesise and apply critical thinking, problem-solving and reasoning and justify a solution within the word count given. The 'content' cluster includes ability to display knowledge of topic given as well as knowledge of related aspects of the topic. The 'focus' and 'content' components were further grouped together as one big component and named as the 'Fulfilment of Task' component.   The proposed workplace written language and communication construct is captured in the diagram, as follows:

Table 1. Proposed Construct of Workplace Written Language and Communication

	Content – Knowledge of topic - Knowledge of related aspects of topic

Fulfilment
of
Task
	Focus – Analysis of task and situation
	            - Critical-thinking, reasoning
	            - Justify solution

	Language – Sentence structure
	            - Vocabulary, technical lexicon
	            - Tense, determiner, article, preposition, subject-verb agreement, adjective, adverb, pronoun

Language and Organisation	

	Coherence – Flow of ideas
	            - Paragraphing
	            - Mechanics

A six-level workplace written language and communication rating scale was drafted based on the above proposed construct; Level 6 being the highest attainable level and Level 1, the lowest. Descriptors of the abilities of the writers, as proposed for each of the components in the above proposed construct, for the different levels, are captured and described in the draft rating scale. The draft rating scale was then shown again to the professionals for validation. Positive feedback was received from them. All but two of the seven interviewed professionals agree with the descriptors. One dissenting voice, however, felt that the rating scale could have been made simpler and easier for evaluation purposes; while another felt that the problem-solving element could have also been incorporated in the descriptor. The feedback and suggestions were noted and refinements were made to the rating scale.

5. Conclusion

The study has shown that in workplace written language and communication, four clusters of abilities, namely, 'focus' and 'content' denoting a graduating student's knowledge of a topic and ability to apply analytical, critical-thinking, reasoning and problem-solving skills to the given task and context, as belonging to a component of the written construct known as 'fulfilment of task'; and 'language' and 'coherence' denoting the graduating student's knowledge of the linguistic system and ability to build up a coherent text in writing, as belonging to the other component of the written construct known as 'language and organisation'. There is agreement among the professionals that a prospective writer should display the features of the above mentioned construct for effective communication in the workplace. They are also in agreement about the standards set as the minimum required. The standard may seem high but in this increasingly competitive and globalised world, prospective employees should aim high to meet the expectations of their prospective employers.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Establishing a Profile of Workplace Written Communication

Part A

1.　　　Type of written output produced by new graduates in your organisation.
_____

2.　　　Language of written output.
_____

3.　　　Length of written output.
_____

4.　　　Your rating of their written output.
_____

5.　　　Your interpretation of weak/satisfactory/good/excellent output.
_____

6.　　　What level of written output is expected in your organisation?
_____

7.　　　The minimum level of written output required in your organisation.
_____

8.　　　The criteria you adopt to assess the written output.
_____

Part B

Position of interviewee: _____

Department: _____

Name of organisation: _____

Type of business/work: _____

Thank you for your cooperation.

Appendix B: Test Of Writing (30 minutes)

You are advised to spend about 30 minutes on this task.

A survey was conducted to identify workplace requirements for employment of university graduates. Table 1 below shows the main reasons for unemployment among university graduates as reported by employers. Table 2 and Table 3 show the top five skills, attributes and other qualities expected of university graduates in the workplace as perceived by university lecturers and students.

Based on information in the tables and your own knowledge, analyse and discuss the findings. Write in **not more than 250 words.**

Table 1: Top three reasons for unemployment among university graduates: Feedback from employers

Reason
• Lack of communication skills in English
• Lack of creativity and critical thinking skills
• Lack of teamworking skills

Table 2: Top five workplace requirements as perceived by university lecturers

Skill / Attitude / Quality	Rank
Communication skills in English	1
Team-working skills	2
Ability to work independently	3
Ethics and integrity	4
Technical knowledge	5

Table 3: Top five workplace requirements as perceived by university students

Skill / Attitude / Quality	Rank
Academic performance	1
Technical knowledge	2
Communication skills	3
Practical experience	4
Ethics and integrity	5