

International Conference on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (ICTLHE 2012) in
conjunction with RCEE & RHED 2012

The Need of English Language Training Programs in Continuing Education

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Abstract

The demand for skilled and well-balanced personnel has led to the growth of continuing education in Malaysia. UTMSPACE, since its inception in 1994, has expanded its role in providing English language training through the establishment of the English Language and Preparatory Programme Unit (UBIPP) in 2007. There are demands for English short courses and tailor-made programmes from the private and public sectors. This paper focuses on the need for retraining of English language competency in continuing education for employees at the workplace. Feedback from training providers, industrial and government sectors are crucial in determining the type of language training needed. The outcome provide some insights for future improvement in training development and continuing education.

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Keywords: Continuing education; lifelong learning; retraining; English language training

1. Introduction

Globalisation and knowledge economy (k-economy) has resulted in rapid technological transformation and increasing knowledge intensity. Countries are obligated to invest on knowledge as a commodity in generating wealth and sustaining economic growth.

Malaysia since then has shifted to the k-economy and the advent of several policies to create a pool of highly competent knowledge workers through education and training. Policies include the advent of Knowledge-based Economy Master Plan in 2002 (The Malaysian Economy in 2002) and National Education Development Plan in order to implement strategies on the provision of lifelong learning, developing communication skills in international language and promoting internationalization of higher education in Malaysia (Malaysia: Education for Sustainable Development [ESD], n.d.).

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UTMSPACE, a pioneer in continuing education and lifelong learning in Malaysia since 1994, has set up the English Language and Preparatory Programme Unit (UBIPP) in 2007 in extending its role to offer English language trainings for the locals as well as for the international students. In line with the National Education Development Plan, UBIPP has offered English language courses for employees who wish to enhance their communication skills and language competency and to become a knowledge worker.

Thus, this paper focuses on the need for retraining of English language competency in continuing education for employees at the workplace. Feedback from training providers, industrial and government sectors are crucial in determining the type of language training needed. The outcome of this paper may provide some insights for future improvement and development of UBIPP, UTMSPACE in taking its role as a global player and centre of excellence in providing lifelong learning.

2. The Needs on Continuing Education in Malaysia

The needs on continuing education in Malaysia are somehow influenced by the government's policy on lifelong learning, market trend in continuing education and constraints on the use of English language at workplace.

2.1. Employees retraining in lifelong learning

The EU's Resolution on Lifelong Learning in 2002 highlighted that the definition of lifelong learning is not restricted to a mere economic outcome or only to adult learning. Lifelong learning should permit all people to acquire the essential knowledge in participating as active citizens in the knowledge society (Building a Community for Lifelong Learning, 2004).

In Malaysian context, the Malaysia Higher Education Plan 2007-1010 defines lifelong learning policy of encompassing training and retraining of the traditional workers so that they can cope with changing nature of work and the employment market due to globalization and rapid changes in technology (Country Report Malaysia, 2008). Malaysia has 11.2 million workforces (Shantilal, 2009) and it is mandatory for them to develop a new mindset on employability in k-economy and ensure their existing knowledge and skills are not likely to be obsolete.

Thus, Malaysian workforces must embrace lifelong-learning which requires them to learn and re-learn applications of new knowledge and skills to develop human capital that are intellectual and innovative (Shakir, 2009). Malaysian workforce should also possess a set of work skills and competencies for lifelong employability which comprise of the competence in reading, writing and computing; effective listening and oral communication skills; adaptability through creative thinking and problem solving; personal management; interpersonal skills; the ability to work in teams or groups; basic technology skills; and leadership effectiveness (International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 2003 Tin, 2006).

Nevertheless, the issues of skills mismatch among workers in countries like Thailand and Malaysia remain pertinent (Figure 1). Significant evidence showed that local skilled production workers in Malaysia are perceived as having poor skills by their employers. About 70% employers perceived the Malaysian local skilled production workers as having poor skills in IT, more than 60% managers perceived their workers weak in English language, and about 50% agreed that these groups of workers are inferior in their communication skills whereas 40% of employers found their workers incompetent in technical and professional skills (Zeufack, 2009).

Based on the facts presented, it is significant for UBIPP and UTMSPACE as the training provider in continuing education to support the government in resolving the issue of skills mismatch in English language competency and communication among these workers.

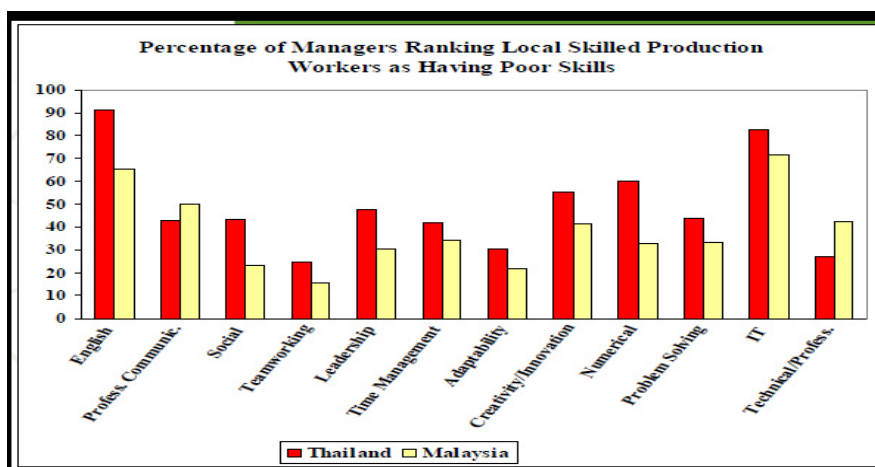


Fig. 1. Percentage of managers ranking local skilled production workers as having poor skills in Thailand and Malaysia

2.2. Trend in continuing education

A survey by UTMSPACE on 1299 respondents also provides important evidence on the need for retraining for English language in continuing education for 2009 and 2010 and its future trend.

The survey findings verified that there is an increasing need in the market for continuing education. At the same time, there is a small decline in interest among the public to pursue certain courses in continuing education, particularly at diploma and certificates level. Additionally, despite having full-time employees as the mainstream group in continuing education, there is still a severe lack of interest among the public in taking up courses related to language.

a) Participation Rate in Continuing Education

- An alarming rate of disinterest in continuing education of (32.1%). Less interest in continuing education in 2009 (8.7%) but an increasing trend in 2010 (26.33%) already continued their education.
- Growing interest to pursue education but uncertain of the commencement time (32.87%) and the main reasons for continuing education is to improve employment skills and for personal satisfaction.

b) Levels in Continuing Education

- A significant interest in future enrollment of postgraduate programmes (56.44%), 51.33% in 2009 and 42.9% in 2010.
- A future decline in interests for degree programmes (24.82%), 33.4% in 2009 and 35.38% in 2010.
- A slight decline in interests of 17.8% for diploma and certificates programmes compared to 19.59% in 2010.

c) Popular Courses in Continuing Education

- Education has been ranked as the most popular course with 30.97% responses in 2009 and 27.49% in 2010.
- In continuing education, management and administration is the popular course with 24.82% responses.
- Language course is ranked 0.23% only and the least popular in continuing education.

d) Allocation for Expenses in Continuing Education

- 40.28% of respondents are willing to spend an average of RM2000 to RM5000 in continuing education.

e) Major Factors Influencing Choice of Institution in Continuing Education

- Major factor influencing choice of institution is location (52.61%), tuition fees (41.2%), and qualification recognition (37.98%).

f) Most Effective Media Channel to Obtain Information on Continuing Education

- Most effective media channel for continuing education is Internet (73.4%), referral by employer/friends/families (37.64%)

g) Employment Status in Continuing Education

- Biggest market segment in continuing education is full time employees (92.27%), only 3.98% are part-time. (*Kaji Selidik Keperluan Pendidikan Lanjutan di Malaysia-Laporan Fasa 1*)

Hence, it is a challenge for UBIPP to tap on the full-time employees market and promote various English language training programmes at certificates level to fulfil their needs for retraining of English language competency at the workplace.

In line with this trend, UBIPP should diversify the promotion of English language competency trainings through internet targeting at more working adults, internet, community fairs and events, media release on students' accomplishment and other miscellaneous advertising such as banner placement at strategic workplaces for adults. Appealing promotional activities and comprehensive training information for English language courses should be tailored to suit the needs of working adults' job designation, whether they are lower management, middle management or upper management. Updates on trainings should be made available on not just on UTMSPACE website but also linked to other popular social software where potential adult learners can be found (Marenzi, Demidova & Nejd, 2008).

2.3. Issues on English language competency at the workplace

Any country that determines to access the global community must ensure that its citizens possess satisfactory proficiency in English language (Baharum & Tretiakov, n.d). Good English language proficiency contributes to effective communication, and it is among essential employability skills needed in the 21st century (Kaur, 2007).

The major concern is that Malaysian workforces are having constraints in English language proficiency to accommodate employability skills in k-economy. A survey in 2009 showed that 56% of the 3000 employers in Malaysia agreed that poor command of English is the major communication barriers when hiring fresh graduates (New Straits Times, July 10, 2009). In 2008, only 55.1% from 175, 806 graduates produced by Malaysian higher institutions secured employment within half a year (The STAR, 12 April 2009). Unfortunately, 94% of the unemployed graduates in Malaysia are found to be Malays (Baharum & Tretaikov, n.d).

The other concern on English language proficiency is that Malaysia is losing its global competitive advantage to attract foreign investment by more international companies (MNC) if Malaysian local business community's English language proficiency cannot fulfill the international business corporation's requirement. Employers from MNC already professed that their Malaysian employees have difficulty in interpreting English reading materials due to weak vocabulary, inferior writing skills and inability to understand native speakers' accent and speech pace (Kaur & Clarke, 2009).

3. The role of UBIPP in employees retraining of English language competency

With the evidence presented earlier UBIPP is dedicated in serving its role to cater to the need of English language training programmes in continuing education.

3.1 English Language Training Programme in UBIPP

Various English language training programmes have been developed by UBIPP for employees to cater the needs of different learners at workplace and also for the public (Table 1).

Table 1. Target market for english language training programmes in UBIPP

Training Programmes	Target Market
English Communication Skills at Workplace	All levels technical & non-technical employees from government agency, private sectors or statutory body
Public Speaking Oral Presentation Skills Technical Report Writing Business Communication	Employees from government agency, private sectors or statutory body
Telephone and Front Desk Etiquette	Receptionist & Operator
Executive Diploma in Business English	Employees from government and private sectors/
Executive Diploma in Effective English Communication	Public with minimum 5 years working experience
General English Course	Public (students waiting for entry into college, recent graduates, working adults)
Pronunciation	School students/university students
MUET Preparatory Course	Form 6 (Upper/Lower) Matriculation Students Diploma Holders
International English Language Test (IELTS) Preparatory Course	Matriculation Students/ University students
Intensive English Course	Foreign undergraduates/ postgraduates who want to pursue education in UTM

The focus of the English language training programmes is mainly for the working adults in both government and private sectors. However, courses like General English Course and pronunciation are also available for the public and university students who interested to improve their general English language proficiency.

3.2. English for business purpose framework

UBIPP has considered English for Business Purposes framework (Figure 2) in designing and implementing the training programmes for employees who come from different employment backgrounds in Malaysia.

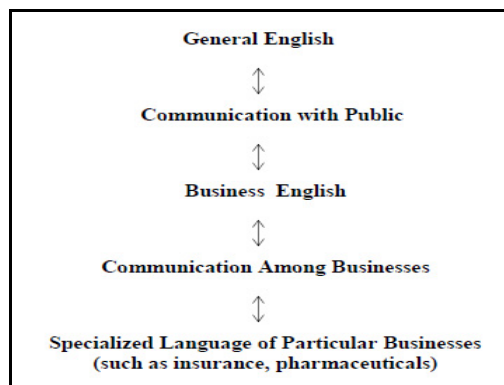


Fig. 2. Framework for English for business purposes

According to this framework, the emphasis on each of the training is different from one course to another. For instance, in General English Course encompasses the skills of Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking in which learners will have the opportunity to develop their understanding of English structure and increase their range of vocabulary as well as enhance their confidence in using the language.

On the other hand, the Public Speaking course is particularly intended for learners who would like to attain basic skills in public speaking for both professional and social contexts. It facilitates learners who have speaking apprehension to achieve confidence and to enhance oral fluency when speaking in public.

As for the English Communication Skills at the Workplace it is designed for employees who are working in public or private sectors in both technical and non-technical lines and hoping to enhance their written and spoken communication skills at their respective workplace. In addition, the course on Effective Presentation Skills helps to equip participants in developing the necessary presentation skills and in enhancing confidence for effective presentation in a variety of situations which helps to open avenues for career advancement. The Telephone and Front Desk Etiquette conversely is planned for people who work at the front desk or use the telephone in their day-to-day interaction with customers, suppliers or members of an organisation. Participants will expand their understanding of powerful telephone techniques along with the key principles of customer service.

Furthermore, UBIPP also uses English for Business Framework (Figure 2) in order to identify the types of participants and use of specific language or terminology for a particular business segments or industry. UBIPP will also consider on the communication skills emphasized in different job segments at workplace for learning outcome, learning tasks and materials design. For instance, feedback from industry showed that listening and conversing are perceived as the two top communication skills (Table 2) by both HR executives and engineers whereas technical report writing is the least important perceived communication skill (Awang, Zainal Abidin, Arshad, Habil & Yahya, 2006). This is to ensure that the materials for English language Programmes in UBIPP offer materials that suits the needs of learners so that it will not create a barrier to learning (Reid 1987).

Table 2. Comparison of top five communication skills between HR executives and engineers

Hr Executives	Mean	Engineers	Mean
1. Listening	5.36	1. Listening	5.39
2. Conversing	5.22	2. Conversing	5.14
3. Verbal Communication	5.16	3. Explaining	5.08
4. Explaining	5.07	4. Verbal Communication	5.02
5. Technical report writing	4.85	5. Technical Report writing	4.93

The trainings in UBIPP also take into deliberations of ‘soft skills’ or ‘people skills’ as employers expect their workers to have such as persuasion and negotiation skills when dealing with clients as well as to demonstrate friendliness and politeness in social setting Shuib (2005). For instance, in the Business Communication course in UBIPP learners are exposed to the appropriate format and conventions of various types of business communication through a variety of activities such as discussions, oral presentations, mock-up meetings and role-plays. Learners can practice using essential language functions such as to persuade, to negotiate and to agree or disagree as the basis for business communication.

3.3. Autonomous Learner

In line with the lifelong learning concept of learners to be responsible for their learning, the approach of English language competency trainings in UBIPP is incorporating a learner’s autonomy in its English language training’s curriculum and instructions English language training programmes in UBIPP integrates activities that requires pairwork, role-play, group discussion, forum, mock meetings and spontaneous speeches so that it relates to real life tasks at work place. According to Ahmad and Megat (2004) autonomous learning allows a bi-directional process where teachers’ functions as facilitator to draw on adult –learner experiences in coping with real life-tasks (Figure 3). Adult learners take some degree of control in deciding what to learn and expect learning to be immediately useful and activities are task-based in nature.

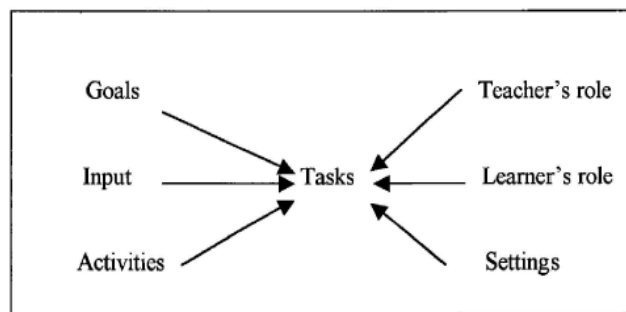


Fig. 3. Task-based Approach Framework (Nunan, 1989 cited in Ahmad & Megat Abdul Rahim, 2004)

Autonomy means independence and thus, in language learning, learners must develop the capacity to learn independently through critical-reflection and decision making and most importantly to extend their educational experiences beyond the classroom in which they use new skills and competencies in language learning to pursue other learning or areas of interest which encourage them to become a life-long learner (Ahmad & Megat Abdul Rahim, 2004).

3.4. Internationalising the training of English language Competency in UTMSPACE

In taking its role as a global player, UBIPP is committed in promoting internationalization of higher education through its English language trainings and foundation course. The international students have become important market segment that generates significant revenue to the unit and UTMSPACE. There were 448 international students from various countries such as China, Iran, the Middle East, the African Continent, and some ASEAN countries enrolled in Semester 1 2008/2009 session and there was a 25% increase in students in that consequent semester.

4. Ensuring the efficiency of the English language training programmes in UTMSPACE

In order to develop and sustain the knowledge of humans, there is a need for continuous training and the development in infrastructure for training, training of teaching staffs and adult education (Abdul Hamid & Badioze Zaman, 2009). The implementation strategies for more efficient English Language Training Programmes include:

a) *Implement Effective and Intensive Marketing Approach*

- Wide marketing coverage that includes local and international market.
- Strategic alliances with foreign smart partners.
- Various languages to be used in marketing the training programmes to suit the target market.

b) *Coordinate Effective Promotion*

- Effective use of media channel, electronic, printed media and smart partner.
- Appealing promotion including repackaging of the English language Programmes with the package of Edu-Tourism and self-access learning in digital language lab.

c) *Employ Competent Workforces*

- Selection of qualified and experienced instructors.
- Retraining of the existing workforces.
- Development of highly committed workforces.

d) *Provide Adequate Facilities*

- Installation of sophisticated equipment
- Well-equipped training room.
- Facilities with conducive environment

e) *Grant attractive remunerations for teaching staff*

- Awarding competitive salary and benefits to teaching staff
- Prompt disburse of salary to teaching staff

f) *Request for support services from UTMSPACE management and the university*

- Practice efficient and flexible management
- Reduce bureaucracy
- Acquire an autonomy to UTMSPACE in its programmes offering
- Eliminate double-standard towards UTMSPACE staff and students
- Maintain excellent bilateral affiliation with other units and departments in UTM.

g) *Provide quality, attractive and accommodating programmes that fulfill customer requirement*

- Acquisition of programs accreditation
- Analysis of market needs
- Administration of customer satisfaction survey

5. Conclusion

In general, the English Language and Preparatory Programme Unit (UBIPP) in UTMSPACE have been dedicated in materializing the government's policy on continuing education to create a pool of knowledge workers for the nation. UBIPP provides training opportunities and nurture the mindset on lifelong learning for local employees and individuals who wish to improve their English language competency and technical skills at workplace.

Input from the industry, training providers and government on lifelong learning, English language learning styles, and trend in continuing education have provided vital information for UBIPP to design, manage, and implement various trainings on English language competency generates revenue which contribute to UTMSPACE's

sustainable growth. The English language trainings and preparatory programmes for international students further strengthens UTMSPACE's position as both pioneer in lifelong learning and excellent global player in continuing education.

From the above developments, it can be assured that lifelong learning, continuous education and training will become important features in the Malaysian higher education and training scene.

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