

ENHANCING LANGUAGE COMPETENCY OF HUMAN RESOURCES AS A BUSINESS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE VIA ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS PURPOSES

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ABSTRACT

This research intends to answer the following two questions: 1). What are the training topics provided by vendors from, either in-house or outside training providers, perceived to be in need for the employees' job performance in terms of English speaking skill? and 2). To what extend is the employees' English speaking skill at certain electronics companies improved via the implementation of English for Business Purposes (EBP) program? The sample of the study was on voluntarily basis comprising of 23 staff in an electronic company in Bangkok, Thailand. Data collection tools included: a questionnaire on language needs; an indirect academic achievement test on speaking; and a module to enhance their level of English fluency in agreement with the participants' needs. The collected data were analyzed using percentage and frequency count. The study found that: 1) Skills most needed were English speaking skill followed by reading and listening skills, respectively. Writing and structures were ranked the least. The five training topics perceived to be most needed ranked in descending order were verbal presentation, the revision of English structures, basic pronunciation, electronic mail writing, and negotiation skill. 2) 20 of the participants (or 85% of them) earn academic achievement scores that met the 80% target attainment.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, English for Business, Human Resources Development and Training

INTRODUCTION

There is no denying that English has become recognized as a lingua franca for communication among countries speaking languages other than English. The language is used as a second/foreign language in quite a few countries or used for a number of purposes such as business, politics, education and entertainment in many other countries. Thai government realizes its role and considers the language proficiency one of the educational commonalities needed to move the country upward in economic achievement. They launched the Eleventh National Development Plan (2013 - 2015). The plan was bases on the holistic and "people-centered development" approaches with broad-based participation. Developing human quality is emphasized as a key factor for strengthening competitiveness and country development. Human resources are an efficient production factor and a crucial input for increasing national competitiveness in the global market [1]. The mastery of English is seen as one of the essential qualifications of Thais to keep compete in the word arena.

The industrial and service sectors are the main sectors in the Thai gross domestic product, and employ the largest portion of Thai workforce at all levels of education both skilled and unskilled workers. The former accounts for 39.2% of national gross product domestic, and shares the national exports value of manufactured goods up to 86 percent of total shipments with electrics (14%), vehicles (13%), machinery and equipment (7.5%) and foodstuff (7.5%) [2]. The volume of foreign direct investment (FDI) (e.g., 52.41, 57.7, and 97.72 million dollars from Australia, Sweden and Switzerland, respectively, during January 2005 to August 2015) has been moved to the sector. According to the UNCTAD World Investment Report 2014, the country is the 7th largest FDI recipient in East and South-East Asia [3].

English is the prime medium language used in the Thai businesses with foreign owners, and also increasingly used as the global language among businesspersons [4][5][6]. The 38.32 million of Thai employed

workforce were, however, reported unskilled and graduated lower than secondary education. Responsibility, problem-solving skill, determination, English communication proficiency, and enthusiasm for work were most wanted by Thai employers, but found short in the workforce [7]. English is the essential skill for effective communication proficiency in businesses, but reported needed for Thai senior managers, managers and staff engineers in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) [8].

Human resource training and development helps to train and educate employees to increase competency and develop career actions. It facilitates changes and improvement as a combination function and provides marketing and promotion for organizational development. The new skills (e.g., computer literacy, English proficiency, teamworking) and timely knowledge proves the value of the employees within the organization's needs. Human resources development should not be considered as an unimportant expense to organizations, nor was it an immediate remedy that can be occasionally conducted to solve short-term problems [9]. Human resource training and development helps to train and educate employees to increase competency and develop career actions. It facilitates changes and improvement as a combination function and provides marketing and promotion for organizational development. Instead, Gilley and Egglund (1992) and Sirapatthada (2015) recommended training be as a long-term strategy for organizational development, achieving client satisfaction, and satisfying developmental needs [10][11]. English for Business Purposes (EBP) refers to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the context of business. The terms are used interchangeably in the article when ESP principles are described and discussed as sets of methodology design to be followed to get the study results. EBP is characterized by hand-on, communicative approach to language teaching. Learners are taught to accomplish tasks that they perform in their professional environment. This kind of language teaching and learning brings the tasks to the forefront of the language training [12][13]. The concept of EBP explains and accounts for the needs of a specific group of learners, and based on such specifications, the design of a syllabus, always keeping in mind the resources available, in terms of both availability of time and teaching expertise. After designing the syllabus, one can go on to develop instructional materials, make a decision on appropriate language teaching methodology, and then make choices of testing and assessment procedures [14].

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized quasi-experimental (One-group Post-Test Only) design with its aim to enhance English speaking skills of the Thai workforce working in electronics industry. A causal link between the treatment condition, namely the training activities, and observed outcomes, namely English speaking skill, was examined. Communicative situations in which language use takes place were explored to find out particular context of communication in occupation. Keeping that in mind, the researcher constructs two following research questions designed to guide this study: 1). What are the training topics provided by vendors from, either in-house or outside training providers, perceived to be in need for the employees' job performance in terms of English speaking skill?, and 2). To what extent is the employees' English speaking skill at certain electronics companies improved via the implementation of English for Business Purposes (EBP) program?

Participants

The participants in this study were 23 employees from an electric company voluntarily taking part in the study. Details of the workshop itinerary were given to all working units via company news circular by HR of the company. 23 of them were interested, and they were from varieties of units - human resources, regional quality assurance, and engineer, and possess bachelor degree the most, followed by the higher ones. They attended the workshop for two days in two consecutive weeks.

Research instruments

The instruments used in this study were:

1) A language module with the emphasis on manipulation of the taught language form (vocabulary and structure) and role playing requiring participants to manipulate the taught form in situations found in working context;

2) A questionnaire survey on the participants' perception of language needs; and 3) An indirect academic achievement test on speaking (in the form of multiple-choice questions). This indirect assessment method has been found reliable and valued in a previous study by Clark (1980) [15]. The test assessed the principle of language usage (i.e., linguistic competence) and functional knowledge of language use (i.e., sociolinguistic competence -- knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately).

Research procedure

The process in which the study was implemented is presented in Figure 1.

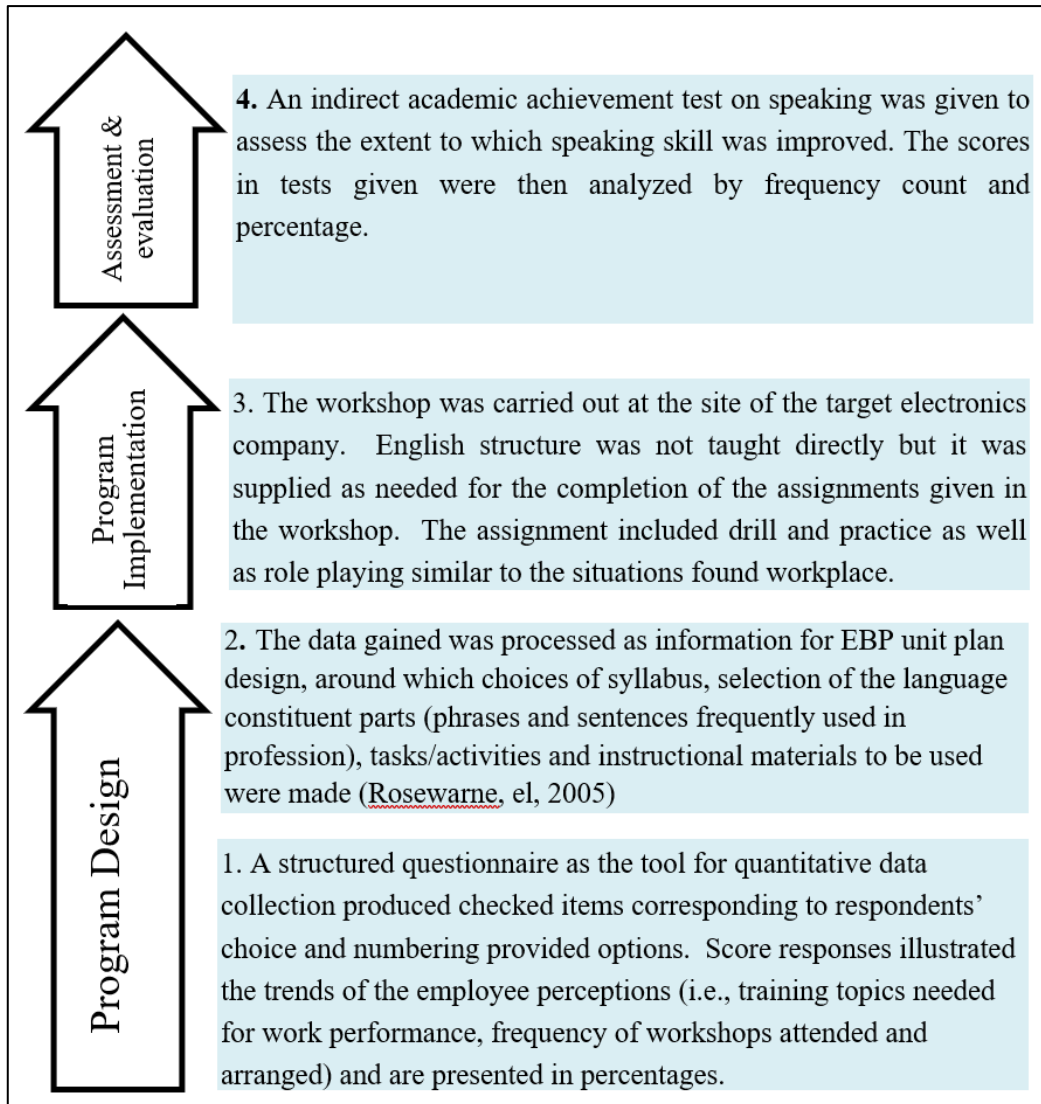


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the process in which the study was implemented

RESULTS

The results of the study are presented according to the two research questions set to guide this study:
 Q1: What are the training topics provided by vendors from, either in-house or outside training providers, perceived to be in need for the employees' job performance in terms of English speaking skill?

To find out what training topics are in need for the job performance in terms of English speaking skill, 23 self-reported questionnaires were mailed to an electronics company, all of which were returned to the researcher. It was found that, among the four communicative skills, the skills most needed were English speaking skill followed by reading and listening skills, respectively. From Table 1

Table 1
Most needed communicative skills and structure and number of the respondents in percentage

Communicative Skills and Structure	Number of Respondents (N=23)	Percentage
Speaking	8	34.78
Reading	5	21.73
Listening	4	17.39
Writing	3	13.04
Structure	3	13.04

Writing and structures were ranked the least. Five training topics perceived to be most needed were listed in consequence as follows: verbal presentation, the revision of English structures, basic pronunciation, electronic mail writing, and negotiation skill. From Table 2

Table 2
Training topics in need for respondents' job performance in term of English speaking skill

Training Topics	Number of Respondents (N=23)	Percentage
Verbal presentation	16	69.56
The revision of English structure	15	65.21
English Basic pronunciation	13	56.52
Electronic mail writing	12	52.17
Negotiation skill	10	43.47

Q2: To what extend is the employees' English speaking skill at certain electronics companies improved via the implementation of English for Business Purposes (EBP) program?

The respondents were from varieties of units - human resources, regional quality assurance, and engineer, and possess bachelor degree the most, followed by the higher ones. Among 23 respondents attending the workshop for two days in two consecutive weeks at their working site, it was reported that 20 out of 23 respondents earn academic achievement scores that meet the 80% target attainment. From Table 3.

Table 3
Academic achievement of the respondents' English speaking skill against the 80% target attainment

No.	Academic achievement scores (N=20)	Percentage 100%	80% target attainment*
1	8	40	Fail
2	18	90	Pass
3	12	60	Fail
4	19	95	Pass
5	17	85	Pass
6	20	100	Pass
7	17	85	Pass
8	19	95	Pass
9	14	70	Fail
10	20	100	Pass
11	18	90	Pass
12	20	100	Pass
13	19	95	Pass
14	20	100	Pass
15	20	100	Pass
16	20	100	Pass
17	20	100	Pass
18	20	100	Pass
19	20	100	Pass
20	20	100	Pass
21	20	100	Pass

22	20	100	Pass
23	20	100	Pass

Note: *The scores that are 16 or greater than that are considered "pass".
The scores that are 15 or less than that are considered "fail".

Table 3 illustrates academic achievement of the respondents' English speaking skill against the 80% target attainment. They are assessed on the principle of language usage (i.e., linguistic competence) and functional knowledge of language use (i.e., sociolinguistic competence -- knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately). Out of 23 respondents, 20 respondents (85% of the total participants) earn the scores of 16 or greater, and only 3 of the 23 (15% of the participants) earn less than 16. To be specific, there are 1 respondent (4.34%) whose scores are within the range of 25-50; 2 respondents (8.69%) whose scores are within a range of 51-75, and 20 (86.95%) whose scores are within the range of 76-100.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings, the conditions enhancing business competitive advantage via language development program for Thai electronic industry are as follow:

1. The effectiveness of language development program hinges on knowing which tasks (i.e., workshop activities) are relevant to which professional situations (e.g., factory hosting for potential customers, technical engineering manuals, quality assurance staff and state safety auditor). It involves consideration of not just one perspective, or one context, but multiple perspectives and multiple contexts. Needs may be investigated from the perspectives of company policy makers (e.g., rules of conduct within an organization -- the duties and responsibilities employee must adhere to, business interests of employers, expectations customers have), that of the workshop attendants (e.g., what can be learned, what should be learned, what differs from learner to learner), and company reports and documents (e.g., sale/marketing report, profit and loss statements, customer service logs).

2. In order for developing successful English for business purpose program, a possible solution lies in arrangements of procedural relationships between HR, training unit in particular, and company board/executive officers. A shift of emphasis is needed from episodic events (e.g., submission of request for budgets, external evaluations for intermittent progress) to a regular interpersonal process of communication. Collaboration in the form of meetings to share events for the coming year, sharing/collocating of resources to make information on innovation practices available, for instance would be ideal.

3. There should be action aiming at the production of comprehensive, realistic and practical guidelines and plans for language development program, English for business purposes in particular, for human resource training and development in factory. A planning pro forma (a framework or draft plan) should be developed to help HR professionals to think about language in an additional way, in factory contexts in particular. The pro forma could serve as a practical completed plan for developing units, identifying linguistic structures and features HR professionals wants employees to develop, the use and usage of the language constituents frequently used in a professional context, texts and materials appropriate during the course of units).

4. Training should be task-centered; a range of workshop activities are designed to required learners to process language pragmatically in order to learn a language. Via tasks, learners concentrate on understanding and conveying meanings (in composition writing) and strongly felt of getting round words and phrases they do not know (and make use language repertoire they own to maximum) so as to get across the intended message. Language is used and learned by means of task accomplishment.

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