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# Analysing Workplace Oral Communication Needs in English among IT Graduates

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## Abstract

Since Information Technology (IT) is a field that covers all aspects of managing and processing information, effective oral communication is vital to IT graduates as it is a significant challenge they face in their day-to-day job, where they are expected to perform various communicative events (Dickson & DeSanctis, 2001). This paper identifies the forms and skills of oral communication in English frequently used by IT graduates as perceived by IT employees. It also discusses the significant differences between employers' expectations and IT graduates actual performance in English oral communication skills. 69 IT employees and 11 IT employers from manufacturing companies in the Free Industrial Zone in Penang participated in this study. The findings reveal that the three most frequently used forms of workplace oral communication are social interaction, participation in meetings and telephone conversations. The findings also indicate that a "skills gap" exists between the IT graduates' actual oral communication performance in English and the IT employers' expectations.

## Introduction

The rapid changes and growth of Information Technology (IT hereafter) have forced organisations to consider the use of IT in supporting their business goals. Every category of job is going to become more dependent on technology in the next century (Smith, 2000). In Malaysia, it is projected that the demand for workers in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) occupations such as hardware engineers, software engineers, system analysts, computer programmers and technical support personnel will increase from 108,000 in 2000 to 181, 600 in 2005 (Eight Malaysian Plan, 2001-2005). This shows that within a short period of time, Malaysia needs to supply 76,000 IT specialists to meet the demand of the workforce. In catering to this change in demographics, the Malaysian government aims to increase computer literacy among students and plans to equip 8000 primary and secondary schools with computer facilities and internet access by the year 2005. The plan also emphasizes changes in the Malaysian higher education sector where more ICT and engineering courses will be introduced in public and private institutions.

Unfortunately, despite the professional and formal training that students and graduates receive,

there is much talk of a "skills gap" in the workplace (Smith, 2000). It is said there are significant gaps between what universities offer and what industries demand. Schools and universities have been blamed and criticised for their failure to adequately prepare students for employment (The Star, 3 September 2002). In 2003, the former Education Minister, Tan Sri Musa Mohamad, called upon public universities to re-examine their training and university programmes to see how "they can overcome the perceived weakness of graduates in terms of low English language proficiency and lack of communication and leadership skills" (The Star, 6 November 2003). In a survey carried out by the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) involving 205 member companies, it was reported that the major problem among local graduates is their inability to communicate well in English (Sunday Star, 9 June 2002).

Although technical knowledge is a requisite to IT employees to function effectively in their discipline-related fields, they can enhance their job performance and chances of employability if they posses effective oral communication ability. Besides the basic skills of reading and writing, effective oral communication skills are additional skills needed by IT workers in their jobs and these skills have been identified by many researchers as important criteria in recruiting personnel, fostering career success and enhancing the quality of one's life (Dickson & DeSanctis, 2001; Smith, 2000; Lee, 2003).

Consequently, there is a need to prepare graduates with effective oral communication skills in English that employers currently desire. Although developing real and virtual communication repertoires are not easy as they involve time, patience and practice, researchers believe that oral communication skills required by the employers are teachable skills (Smith, 2000; Kaur & Thiyagarajah, 2003).

## Oral Communication in the Workplace

The emergence of innovative communication technologies, expanded team-based management and an increasingly diverse workforce has caused business and industry employers to seek for multiple-skilled knowledge workers who need to deal with words, figures and data. Due to the profound changes in the workplace, employers are increasingly expecting workers to have effective oral communication skills. In this paper, the term "forms of oral communication" refers to communicative events engaged in by IT graduates in the workplace, such as *telephone conversations, meetings, formal discussions, presentations, social interactions and interviews*. The term "skills of oral communication" refers to the entire knowledge and ability that enables one to do something well and includes the following skills: *listening skills, conversational skills, giving feedback, meeting skills, presentation skills, handling customer complaints, conflict resolution skills, negotiation skills, taking customers' orders, training skills, interviewing skills, persuading skills and promoting one's own strengths and abilities* (Maes et.al., 1997).

In a survey conducted by Maes et.al (1997), oral communication skills have been identified as the most important skills in the workplace. Their study conducted in the Greater Gulf Coast area, including the coastal areas of Mississippi, Alabama and the Florida panhandle, revealed that oral communication in English is the most important skill demanded by employers when it comes to recruiting new staff. In addition to being one of the most essential skills for employment, oral communication skills are vital to job success and promotion (Lee, 2003; Crosling & Ward, 2001). Huckins & Olsen (1984) are of the view that employees who do not demonstrate good oral communication skills are rarely given managerial responsibility. Effective oral communication skills are vital to people who hold managerial positions because managers need to explain, listen to, persuade, guide, coach, encourage, facilitate and direct group members to meet the goals of individuals and their organisations. Effective oral communication enables individuals to be understood and helps create understanding between people and fosters good relationship among workers in any business context (DiSanza & Legge, 2000).

## Communication Networks in Workplace Environments

According to Adler & Elmhorst (2002), the system of communication networks provides information on the communication patterns among people in organisations of various status and situations that exist in the workplace. They suggest that the two common networks are the 'formal communication network' (comprising three types of communication: downward, upward and horizontal communication) and the 'informal communication network' (arising from personal interest, friendships, physical proximity or shared office space).

Formal messages that flow from managers and supervisors to subordinates are called 'downward communication'. All organisations need downward communication as it is through this channel that the management of an organisation will transfer their decisions, orders, rules, information and policies to their subordinates who transform them into actions. If information must flow downwards to be transformed into actions, information must also flow from the bottom to the top of an organisation to get good ideas and solutions to difficult problems and enable rules, policies or ideas to be implemented and recognised (Morreal et.al., 2001). In addition, there must also be a free flow of ideas and information between people and departments at the same level in the organisation, which is called 'horizontal communication'. In horizontal communication, messages flow laterally between co-workers with the same or similar status. This form of communication is said to be essential in an organisation for employees to coordinate tasks when they are working on part of an important project to solve problems, to share information and to resolve conflicts such as jealousy or disagreement between workers.

## Forms and Skills of Workplace Oral Communication

An understanding of the communication patterns in the workplace will necessitate inquiry into various ways of workplace communication to arrive at an understanding of the forms and skills used in an organisation. Research shows that the three main types of communication are: verbal, non-verbal (e.g. gestures, body language) and written communication (e.g. reports, memos, letters etc.). Between oral and written communication in the workplace, oral communication is more extensively used and rated more important when writing is compared with oral communication (Maes et. al.,1997). In another study conducted by Boyette (1995; cited in Miller et.al., 1997), graduates enrolled in engineering curricula spent 26% of their work time involved in written communication and spent almost 56% of their working time in oral communication. The study also reveals that graduate employees spend most of their time communicating with people who are in the same department with them, such as their peers and superiors, while half as much time is spent with people from other companies, such as vendors, customers, regulators and the media. Among the communication events performed most by the graduate employees were personal activities and status reports, group meetings, giving instructions and formal presentations.

Adler & Elmhorst (2002) contend that when face-to-face communication is not possible (due to separation by great distance which causes the charges of communication to be costly, time-consuming and impractical), teleconferencing, telephone and voice mail may take place in the workplace. They also highlight the importance of good listening skills as the relationship between listening and speaking needs to be emphasised as both skills are interrelated. Peters (2002) suggests that effective communicators in the IT industry must possess good listening skills because employers in the IT industry spend considerable time listening and communicating with people in the workplace as technical professionals are "fundamentally problem solvers" (Huckin & Olsen, 1984).

## Theoretical Framework

Within this ESP context, the researchers view the term "needs" as comprising not only the English oral communication needs of the IT graduates at their workplace but also their employers' needs and the industry's needs at large. In identifying target needs of IT graduates in the workplace, the

researchers subscribe to Hutchinson & Waters' (1987) definition of target needs in term of 'necessities', ' lacks' and 'wants'. To analyse the workplace oral communication needs of the IT graduates, the researchers have to study 'necessities' determined by the demands of the IT graduates currently working in their workplace, that is, what the IT graduates need to know in order to function effectively in the target situation. Hutchinson & Waters (1987) say that identifying the necessities alone is not enough as one needs to know the areas of necessities of the graduates 'lack'. Hence, it is important to identify the 'lacks' of the IT graduates because one needs to close the gap between what is expected of the employers against the existing performance of the IT graduate employees.

The development of the model for needs analysis is based on aspects forwarded by Hutchinson & Waters (1987:59) on the 'why, 'how', ' who', ' where' questions in their target situation analysis (TSA) framework. These questions were adhered to in the formulation of the questionnaires. The questions will be aimed at identifying the following workplace oral communication needs in English among IT graduate employees:

- How important are oral communication skills in English to IT graduates in the workplace?
- How will the oral communication skills in English be used?
- What are the forms of oral communication skills in English used in the workplace?
- How frequently and with whom will the oral communication skills in English be used?
- Who will the IT graduates communicate with in English?
- Where will they use those skills in their workplace?
- How competent are IT graduates in performing their oral communication skills in English at the workplace?

The researchers considered workplace oral communication needs in English among IT graduate employees with reference to the needs of the employers and IT graduates themselves. The contextual settings where the oral communication takes place was also taken into consideration.

## Method

Local IT graduates from the manufacturing sector in Penang's Free Industrial Zone were selected because this sector recorded the highest utilisation and investments in ICT during the Seventh Plan Period (Eight Malaysia Plan, 2001-2005). In addition, the highest job vacancies were concentrated in the manufacturing sector (50.4%), particularly in the electrical and electronics subsectors (Economic Report 2002/2003). Penang was chosen as it houses most of the manufacturing plants in Malaysia, besides Selangor. There are a total of 80 respondents, comprising 69 IT graduates and 11 IT employers. The IT employees hold the following job positions in their workplace: hardware engineers, software engineers, system analysts, computer programmers and technical support personnel. The employer sample consists of personnel who hold managerial positions from various IT departments in their organisations. Four IT employers were also interviewed.

The researchers used a variety of research procedures because researchers point out that a single approach to analysing the needs of students in any context only yields limited data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Data were obtained through the use of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Two sets of questionnaires were used: one for the IT employees and another set for the IT employers. The construction of the questionnaires were adapted from

questionnaires designed by Crosling & Ward (2001) and by supplementing with a list of oral communication skills listed by Maes et. al. (1997). Furthermore, based on some current literature and information gathered from informal talks and discussions with IT employees and employers working in various IT departments during the pilot study, the researchers were able to construct the questionnaire comprehensively. A pilot test was carried out among six IT employees and two IT employers from two semiconductor manufacturing companies in Penang. Some pertinent improvements were made based on findings from the pilot study (presentation aspects such as removing italicised instructions and improving word choice for some items).

Both questionnaires and interviews were self-administered by the researchers as it posed less problems. Electronic mail (e-mail) was used as the main channel in distributing and collecting the questionnaires because it is generally reliable, convenient (for instance attachments can be sent within seconds to many recipients at the same time), more effective and cost-saving. The questionnaires were distributed through e-mail to all IT graduates and handled face-to-face or via e-mail to the IT managers. The researchers' email addresses and contact numbers were stated at the end of the questionnaires to ensure that the respondents sent the questionnaires back to the researchers or contacted the researchers to pick them up once they were completed. All respondents were given one week to complete the questionnaires. If the respondents did not return the questionnaires after the first week, they were sent a copy of the questionnaire through e-mail again with a friendly reminder. In this way, the non-respondents were given another three working days to complete the questionnaires. Finally, telephone follow-up calls were made to request for IT managers' cooperation and help if respondents at their workplace still did not reply within the stipulated deadlines.

The researchers interviewed the four IT managers at their workplaces after office hours in order not to interfere with their work during office hours. Some arranged appointments were cancelled because the IT employers needed to attend to urgent work-related matters and new appointments had to be scheduled.

## Findings and Discussion

A total of 69 IT graduates participated in this study. Table 1 below shows the profile of the respondents at a glance:

Table 1: Profile of IT Graduates

| Demographic Factors | | Total (n=69) | Percentage (100.0%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 20-25 years old | 17 | 24.7 |
| | 26-30 years old | 43 | 62.3 |
| | 31-35 years old | 5 | 7.2 |
| | 36-40 years old | 4 | 5.8 |
| Gender | Male | 42 | 60.9 |
| | Female | 27 | 39.1 |
| Work Experience | 1-3 years | 36 | 52.2 |
| | 4-6 years | 29 | 42.0 |
| | 7-9 years | 4 | 5.8 |
| Job Designation | Systems Analyst | 25 | 36.2 |
| | Programmer | 13 | 18.8 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Software Engineer | 11 | 15.9 |
| | Project Engineer | 9 | 13.1 |
| | Technical Support | 7 | 10.2 |
| | IT Engineer | 2 | 2.9 |
| | Network administrator | 2 | 2.9 |
| Education Level | Basic Degree | 61 | 88.4 |
| | Postgraduate qualification | 8 | 11.6 |
| Major Area of Study | Engineering and IT | 38 | 55.1 |
| | Computer Science | 29 | 42.0 |
| | Others | 2 | 2.9 |

The findings reveal that 17 of the IT graduates are in the 20-25 age group. Most of them (62.3%) fall into the 26-30 age group. The remaining 13% of them are distributed among the other two age groups where five of them are in the 31-35 age group and only four of them fall into the 36-40 age group. The IT graduate sample comprises 42 males and 27 females, indicating that there are more male respondents in this study. In terms of working experience, most respondents (52.2%) have worked for 1-3 years. 29 of them have worked for about 4-6 years while the rest of them had been working for about 7-9 years. 25 (36.2%) of the IT graduates are systems analysts while 13 are programmers and 11 are software engineers. Almost all of them (88.4%) have a basic degree. In addition, more than half (55.1%) the respondents have engineering and IT-related degrees.

In analysing the IT employers' sample (11 respondents), it was found that the majority of them are in the 36-40 age group and three of them belong to the 31-35 age group. The IT employers also have different job designations and they comprise IT Hardware Communication Manager, IT Manager, IT Automation Manager and Assistant Information Technology Systems (ITS) Manager. Seven of them possess first degrees while four of them have postgraduate qualifications.

*Frequent Use of Oral Communication in English*

In the survey, IT graduates had to answer three questions (using a four-point Likert scale) about the frequency of oral communication use at work. These questions were broadly divided into six forms and 14 skills of oral communication in English. The results reveal that 'social interaction' or informal work-related discussion is the most frequently occurring form of oral communication in English (mean = 3.91). This figure indicates that in the IT graduates' working environment, it is evident that sharing of ideas and working experience happens among them on a frequent basis. The second most important form of oral communication is 'telephone conversation' (mean = 3.59) and the third is 'interviewing skills' (mean = 3.16). Other communication activities include: one-to-one meeting (mean=2.75), short presentations (mean= 2.26) and longer presentations (mean=2.30).

Table 2 below shows the frequency of oral communication use among IT graduates at the workplace:

Table 2: Frequency of IT Graduates' English Oral Communication Use with Different Groups of People

| | Groups of People | | Rarely (%) | Seldom (%) | Sometimes (%) | Frequently (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. | Same Department | Colleagues | - | - | 2.9 | 97.1 |
| | | Superior/Supervisor | - | - | 7.2 | 92.8 |
| | | Staff of Lower Status | - | - | 20.3 | 79.7 |
| b. | Different Department | Staff of Similar Status | - | 10.1 | 27.5 | 62.3 |
| | | Staff of Higher Status | - | 10.1 | 73.9 | 15.9 |
| | | Staff of Lower Status | - | 26.1 | 27.5 | 46.4 |
| c. | Other Companies | Staff of Similar Status | 69.9 | 15.9 | 14.5 | - |
| | | Staff of Higher Status | 75.4 | 24.6 | - | - |
| | | Staff of Lower Status | 50.7 | 30.4 | 18.8 | - |

The table shows that among the people of various hierarchies within their company, IT graduates communicate most frequently with staff of their similar status (97.1% of the respondents rated using English oral communication frequently with co-workers). Results from the survey show that IT graduates always use the following skills when communicating with their peers: listening (100.0%), conversing orally (91.3%), participating in company meetings (60.9%), handling complaints (55.1%) and using oral presentation skills (50.7%).

They also frequently communicate orally with their superiors (92.8%). Results from the survey show that the following subskills are frequently utilised by IT graduates: *following instructions* (76.8%), *having informal discussions with superiors* (73.9%), *participating in meetings* (63.8%) and *using interviewing skills to get feedback* (58.0%). In addition to this, 79.7% of the respondents state that they 'frequently' communicate orally with staff of lower status within their company.

When communicating with staff from different departments in their companies, 62.3% of the respondents state they 'frequently' use oral communication in English to carry out the following communicative events: *use listening skills to gather information, have informal discussions, handle complaints, use interview skills to get feedback or information*. It is interesting to note that only 15.95 of the respondents communicate 'frequently' with staff of higher status but most of them (73.9%) do so 'sometimes'.

In terms of using oral communication in English to interact with people from other companies, the findings show that IT graduates rarely communicate with people from other companies. There is a small percentage of respondents (13.0%) who state that they 'sometimes' need to listen to people

from other companies on work-related matters. Although a reasonable percentage (33.3%) of the respondents communicate orally when taking instructions/orders from their clients or customers from other companies, the findings show that this rarely happens. The interview sessions with the IT employers reveal that most IT employees require minimal contact with people from other companies as IT employees are actively involved in monitoring and improving the network system of their own company as they need to ensure the database created by them is able to cater to the needs of their organisation.

## The Importance of Oral Communication Skills

The findings of this study support the view that oral communication skills in English are important to IT graduates in the major aspects of their jobs in recruitment (getting a job in an interview), promotion and professional development (e.g. being selected for attending training, courses, conventions). The surveys show that about 45.5% of the employers perceived oral communication as the most important criteria for recruitment than for job success (27.3%) and professional development (27.3%). This accords with the feedback from some IT employers in the interview sessions who state that effective oral communication skills can help graduates to get a job but in terms of promotion and professional development, other personal qualities are considered desirable (positive attitude towards work, good interpersonal skills, leadership ability etc.).

## Employers' Perceptions

The findings reveal that IT employers rate the following skills highly: *following instructions, giving feedback, listening skills and effective oral presentation skills*. This indicates that IT employees should perform well in these skill areas as these are key skills that employers look for in employees. The semi-structured interviews with the employers reveal similar results pertaining to their perceptions of skills valued by them.

To understand how competent IT graduates are in performing their workplace oral communication skills, this study focuses on discovering the lacks of oral communication skills among IT graduates at their workplace. The survey results show that the mean scores for the IT graduates' actual oral communication performance in English in all types of oral communication skills are *lower* than the mean scores perceived by the employers. This indicates that IT graduates performance is lower than their employers' expectations in all types of oral communication skills in English.

During the interview sessions, the employers were asked four questions about their perceptions of local IT graduates' oral communication in English skills. The employers state that *'presentation skills, listening skills, interviewing skills and conversational skills in English' are* vital for IT employees. The employers also state that universities and organisations should jointly shoulder the responsibility for training and developing IT graduates' oral communication skills in an effort to further enhance graduates' oral communication ability.

## Conclusion

This study makes the claim that effective oral communication skills in English are important to IT graduates in any workplace context as these skills can increase the chances of employees' employability and enhance their work performance. The 'skills gap' that exist between the IT graduates' actual oral communication performance and the IT employers' expectations necessitates that both universities and industry take steps to improve this imbalance. Universities can re-structure and realign some of their IT course content and curriculum to suitably meet the workplace demands imposed on IT graduates. Similarly IT employers can take heed of their employees' lacks (with regard to oral communication ability) and conduct on-site training to further develop and enhance these communicative skills as they would pave the way towards

adequately preparing IT graduates to meet the rapid changes in information and communication technologies of the world. A strong human resource base would greatly enhance an organisation's ability to compete in the global market and in the k-economy (Kaur & Thiyagarajah, 2003).

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