



Employer's Perspective on Bilingual Competency for Workplace Communication: Implications for Lifelong Learning Strategies

*Nooreiny Maarof, Hamidah Yamat, Juriah Long
Dept of Methodology & Educational Practice
Faculty of Education
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Malaysia*



Overview

- I. Introduction
- II. Background
- III. Methodology
- IV. Findings
- V. Implications

Introduction

- Malaysia's aspiration to become a developed nation - Vision 2020 (Mahathir 1991)
- 9 challenges – commitment of the citizens (public & private sectors) in development of a scientific and progressive nation; a society that has high ability for change & is forward looking ; users and contributors of technology and scientific culture
- Language competence and human resource development – education and training a crucial strategy for a skilled and professional workforce
- Communicative competence – added advantage for workers of developed nations –other than numeric skills

Background

- Policies developed to guide realization of Vision 2020 – *Dasar Wawasan Negara* (Malaysia 2001) – in working towards a developed nation
- 21st century – focus on development of human resource (HR): skilled, efficient, productive and knowledgeable (Malaysia 2001:4)
- Education Act 1996 – revised to meet with the challenges of the 21st century and fulfill goals of Vision 2020

Background

- Education Act 1996: nation's development through the national system of education, Bahasa Malaysia (BM) as medium; English language as a second language (ESL) and a compulsory subject in all schools, while other foreign languages are taught at the secondary school level.
- Language experts and economists concur: language and communicative competence in education and training of human resource (Zainal Abidin 1993; Nik Safiah 2001, among others).

Background

- Past research (Robiah et al. 1999; Juriah et al. 1999, 2001) – students and workers consider BM and English as two important languages with specific roles in HRD.
- Students and trainee workers at vocational/ technical colleges understand better learning materials and instruction in BM (Robiah et al. 1999).
- At the same time, they think English is necessary in helping to access and master information from multiple sources.



Background

- Professional and semi-professional workers consider BM to be relevant and important for 21st century HRD (Juriah et al. 2001).
- Findings on limited communicative ability of graduates from public universities (Robiah 2000; Azlina 2000).
- Employers require graduates to be competent in both languages (Azlina 2000).



Background

- Ministry of Human Resource – 2003 approximately 13,000 unemployed graduates (Utusan Malaysia 2003)
- Various factors: areas of study which do not meet requirements of industry/employers/market needs; failure of graduates to equip themselves through the curriculum; a rigid and firmly focused co-curricular system; and discrepancy between university pedagogy and market needs (Utusan Malaysia 25 Sept 2002; Juriah et al. 2001)

Background

- What are the language and communicative competence needs of employers in relation to HRD?
- This also addresses the needs of students at institutions of higher learning and human resource development in the workplace.
- This study is part of a larger study that examined the perception of employers as to the significance being proficient in BM and English in relation to workplace needs.

Methodology

The research questions posited were:

1. What are the BM and English language needs of public and private sector professional workers from the perspectives of employers and workers?
2. What are the employers' perception of their workers BM and English communicative competence?
3. Do the professional workers need to master both BM and English for the purposes of conducting their duty and fulfilling responsibility at the workplace?



Research Questions

4. What are the employers' and workers' perception of the importance of mastering BM and English communicative competence among professional workers?
5. What aspects of BM and English competency do professional workers need?
6. Do the employers provide BM and English communicative skills courses for the professional workers?

Methodology

- Quantitative and qualitative approach
- Main study: 7 categories of population: PIHL; BM and English instructors/lecturers; professional workers; public and private sector employers; BM and English key personnel
- Sampling: Stratified cluster sampling
- Employer and worker sample: from private and public organizations/sectors in Malaysia
- Total sample size: 1600 (Krejcie & Morgan, 2000)
- 500 professional workers and 450 employers



Instruments

1. Questionnaire
 - Comprises 2 sections: A – Background Information/Demographics; B – Items on BM and English needs and significance
 - Section B comprises items that asked for:
 1. Specific needs for mastery of BM and English in the workplace
 2. Need for BM and English training courses
 3. Importance of the specific language skills (BM and Eng) – listening, speaking, reading, writing

Methodology

4. Importance of BM and Eng communicative competency for specific skills in relation to work – e.g. Listening to: briefings; talk; presentation, instructions/announcements, report

Questionnaire for workers:

- 2 sections: Demographic Information and items on use of BM and English at work

Eg. What is the main language of communication used at the workplace?



Instrument

- Does your work require competency in BM and English for the following task and responsibility? (e.g. planning activities and development of the organization; to implement daily tasks; to communicate with other local organizations and companies)

Other items request response to importance of the two languages for each specific language skill, whether they need training courses that could help enhance their language skills.

Findings

Respondents Profile - Professional workers ([Appendices A & B](#))

- 455 professional workers were involved in the study
- Female – 223; Male – 232
- Ethnicity: 71.2 % Malay; 22.4% Chinese; 5.3% Indian; 1.1% others
- Private sector: 68.5%; Public sector: 31.5%
- Qualifications/Education: Diploma 32.6%; Bachelors 55.7%; Masters 7.5%; PhD 0.9% and other qualifications 3.3%
- 54.8% use BM; 40.1% English; 5.1% Chinese in the workplace
- A total of 76.6% of the respondents are aged below 35.

Respondents' Profile - Employers

- Total of 414 employers responded to the questionnaire (Appendix A & B)
- Public sector 22.2%; Private sector 77.8%
- National level organizations 59.8%; International organizations 40.2%
- Workers used BM 90.8%; English 87%

Findings based on the Research Questions

1. What are employers perception towards professional workers' competency in Bahasa Malaysia and English?
 - Majority of employers think that their workers in the organization are competent in both languages.
 - They think that the workers are proficient in BM, while 87.4% are competent in English.
 - Both agreed that BM and English are the main language of communication at the workplace.



Findings

- A total of 50.2% of employers and 54.8% of professional workers consider BM to be the main language of communication. ([Appendix C](#))
- Whereas 39.1% employers and 40.1% workers consider English to be the main language of communication at the workplace.



Findings

2. What are the workers' and employers' perception on the importance of competency in BM and English among Professional Workers
 - Both employers and workers consider language competence is important in terms of all aspects of language skills.
 - Percentage of this importance of English competency is higher than BM for employers (> 90%)

Findings

3. Do the professional workers need to master both BM and English for the purposes of conducting their duty and fulfilling responsibility at the workplace?
 - Employers (84%-95%) believe that the need for competency in English is of higher priority than BM.
 - The reading skill was rated highest by employers for the purpose of knowledge acquisition (95.7%).
 - Meanwhile, workers rated listening skill (for briefings in Eng) as the most pertinent skill (99.0%) as opposed to reading (instructions in Eng) – 53.0%.



Findings

4. What are the employers' and workers' perception of the importance of mastering BM and English communicative competence (specific skills) among professional workers?
 - Both employers and workers consider listening skill in BM to be the most important among the four skills. This is similar for English. ([Appendix D](#))

Findings

5. What aspects of BM and English competency do professional workers need?
 - For BM, both employers and workers concur that among the aspects of language competency, the most needed is listening to briefings/talk; speaking – interaction in the workplace; reading – to increase knowledge (employer) & reading reports (workers); writing official letters/memos (employers), writing notes for briefing (workers)



Findings

- For English, both employers and workers concur that listening to briefings; speaking – meetings and discussion (employers), discussion (workers); reading – reading proposals (employers), reading to increase knowledge (workers); writing - reports (employers), official letters & memos (workers)



Findings

6. Do the employers provide BM and English communicative skills courses for the professional workers?
- 36.6% of employers of organizations and companies have conducted Eng language courses for their employees
 - only 12.2% have conducted for BM courses

Summary

- The main language of communication at the workplace according to both employers and workers are BM and English. However % of agreement for BM is 50.2% in comparison to 39.1% for Eng.
- Employers consider 90.8% of their workers are competent in using BM in comparison to only 87.4% of workers who are skilled in English.
- Both employers and workers regard BM and Eng are required in various work tasks among professional workers.

Summary

- English is mostly required for the purpose of communication between other organizations and companies within local and international contexts (94.1% -95.7%). Followed by the need to use Eng for - disseminating knowledge and skills in the workplace, planning activities and development for the organization & conducting daily tasks.
- BM is needed for establishing social relationships with workers; followed by for communicating with other organizations and to disseminate knowledge and skills in the workplace.

Summary

- Both employers and workers consider all aspects of language (BM & Eng) to be important. However, most employers consider English skills to be more important.
- Workers prefer to be given Eng language courses more than BM. However employers (74.1%) disagree in providing such courses.
- Public sector employers emphasized the need for mastery of BM communications skills in comparison to the public sector which places more importance on Eng language needs.

Implications

- Both BM and English are important for workplace communication. Each language has its role to play. BM is much needed for workers to communicate with their subordinates. While Eng is more frequently used among workers to communicate among themselves and with the management.
- Employers need to be aware of the specific language needs of their employees and provide appropriate training not only for short term purposes,

Implications

but also as a means to provide their workers with opportunities for lifelong learning– this is crucial for developing nations to produce 21st century workers who are not only technically skilled but also communicatively competent to deal with local and international relations.

Thank You!
Terima Kasih!