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ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 90 (2013) 324 – 333

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

6th International Conference on University Learning and Teaching (InCULT 2012)

Unemployed Graduates' Perceptions on their General Communication Skills at Job Interviews

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to assess the general communication skills of unemployed graduates at job interviews. The sample population comprised unemployed graduates who took part in the 1 Malaysia Training Scheme (SLIM program) set up by the Malaysian government to address the issue of unemployment amongst the Malaysian graduates. The mixed method research was employed using research instruments comprising survey questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. Questionnaires using a five point Likert scale were administered to 506 respondents where 337 were finally regarded as useable. Meanwhile face-to-face interviews were conducted with thirteen unemployed graduates from the same group of respondents in the SLIM program. Descriptive analysis indicated that more than half of the respondents were in the range of moderate to low level in their general communication skills. Independent t-tests carried out indicated that there were significant differences for gender and types of higher education institutions (HEIs) in relation to general communication skills. Male unemployed graduates seemed to have higher general communication skills compared to their female counterparts, while unemployed graduates from the private HEIs (IPTs) have better general communication skills than those from the public HEIs (IPTAs). The ANOVA tests carried out with MUET band scores and general communication skills showed an upward trend where the higher the MUET band score, the higher the mean of general communication skills. Findings were further enhanced by the qualitative data that conformed to the data obtained from the quantitative analysis. Another equally important finding of the study is the association between general communication skills and communication apprehension. This finding opens up the prospect for further research, that general communication skills need to be assessed in relation to communication apprehension among unemployed graduates in Malaysia.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of the Faculty of Education, University Technology MARA, Malaysia.

Keywords: General communication skills; unemployed graduates; job interviews; questionnaires; face-to-face interviews

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1. Introduction

Job interviews are considered as graduates' first steps towards entering the job market, where according to Posthuma, Morgeson and Campion (2002) will continue to be one of the most popular selection and recruiting devices in organizations that will "predict the future job success of applicants" (Dipboye & Gauglar, 1993, p. 136). Employability of a graduate is the predilection of the graduate to show attributes that employers predict will be required for the future successful functioning of their organisation (Harvey, 2000). One of the main determinants of whether a graduate will be hired is his communication competence (Eder & Ferris, 1989; Mino, 1996; Singh & Singh, 2008). Archer and Davison (2008) in their study reported that employers considered good communication skills as important when recruiting new graduates; however they found that most new graduates were unable to express themselves effectively. This weakness in graduates' communications skills has been acknowledged by the UK government with respect to its graduates (Dickinson, 2000). The same problem seemed to be affecting the Malaysian scenario. About 28, 000 to 34, 000 graduates from the year 2008 – 2010 have failed to secure employment (Department of Statistics [DOS], 2011) due to reasons such as a lack of experience, poor in English, and poor in communication skills (Suresh, 2006). Prospective employers found during job interviews clear indications that Malaysian graduates even though well trained in their areas of specialization lack the communication skills necessary to communicate their knowledge and to promote themselves (Singh and Singh, 2008; Abdul Rahim, 2000; Nurita et al., 2010). This paper focuses on unemployed graduates' general communication skills (or their lack thereof) in the context of job interviews. The term general communication skills in this study refer to the skills required to communicate appropriately and effectively (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) in giving ideas, opinions, and information in a two-way communication between the interviewee and interviewer/s. These skills include speaking, listening, understanding, thinking, talking and participating in verbal exchanges and discussions conducted in English which are considered as essential at job interview situations (Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997).

2. Literature review

Many studies in communication competence have stated how knowledge of context, language, skills in using language, motivation and even attitudes towards using a particular language play important roles in competent communication (Hymes, 1972; Wiemann, 1977; Morreale, Spitzberg & Barge, 2007). One such study conducted by Spitzberg & Cupach (1984) provides a useful framework for a better understanding of communication competence. According to Spitzberg and Cupach (1984), communication competence comprises three interdependent dimensions namely motivation that they refer to as an individual's approach or avoidance orientation in communication in various social situations, knowledge that guides the individual about what to say and do (in Morreale, Spitzberg & Barge, 2007), content knowledge that refers to his understanding of topics, words and meanings in at particular situation, and finally skills that refer to the individual's ability to discuss, ask questions, respond to questions. Communication competence is also dependent on the context or communication situations in which the interaction takes place (Cody & McLaughlin, 1995; Rubin, 1985; Morreale, Spitzberg & Barge, 2007). The job interview situation is a challenging, dynamic process of interpersonal communication context upon which graduates need to demonstrate their knowledge in their fields of study using language as a tool of communication. The outcome may depend heavily on how effectively and appropriately they have communicated their knowledge. The job interview situation is best likened to Wiemann et al. (1977, p27) description as "...situations in which the competence of the individual is tested, within a relationship which is constantly facing the challenges of the environment".

Employability theories offered by researchers are synonymous with those of communication theories in that most agree that the major components of employability depends on competent communication knowledge, skills, attitudes and personal attributes (Yorke & Knight, 2004; Pool & Sewell, 2007; Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000). The study by Peterson (1997) carried out with personnel interviewers in

the United States indicated that employers demand communication skills as essential for success in job interviews (see also The Dearing Committee, 1997; Lawrence, 2002). Various interview researches suggest that employers in all occupational fields place greater value on employees' communication skills than they do on their technical skills (McPherson, 1998; Maes et al., 1997; Winterbotham et al., 2001). Some of the constructs that have been found to correlate with effective performance at job interviews include communication (Daly, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1977; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984), communication apprehension (Ayer, Ayer & Sharp, 1993; McCroskey, 1982; Spencer & Spencer, 1993) and oral communication and listening skills (The American Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills report (SCANS), 1992; Cooper, 1997; Maes et al. 1997).

3. The study

This was a descriptive-correlation study employing the mixed method of data collection to explore the general communication skills of unemployed graduates in Malaysia. Respondents comprised unemployed graduates who took part in the 1 Malaysia Training Scheme (SLIM program) set up by the Malaysian government to address the problem of unemployment amongst graduates in the country (Economic Planning Unit, 2011). The quantitative instrument, referred to as the Job Interview Communication Competence Scale (JICCS) used in this study is a self-report questionnaire adapted from the following six instruments namely: McCroskey & McCroskey's (1988) Self-Perceived Communication Competence scale (SPCC), Wiemann's (1977) Communicative Competence Scale (CCS), Ayres, Ayres, and Sharpe's (1993) Personal Report of Communication Apprehension in Employment Interviews (PRCAEI) and McCroskey (1982) Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). The general communication items in the JICCS were constructed based on literature and information gathered from informal talks and discussions with human resource managers. The items in the questionnaire were scored on a five point Likert scale with options ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The instrument was checked and validated by a panel of experts. Before conducting the actual study, a pilot test was carried out with 35 similar selections of respondents – i.e. unemployed graduates who attended a training programme conducted in May 2010 at the Malaysian Economic Planning Unit, Putrajaya. The JICCS was found to have a Cronbach's coefficient alpha of .81, while the dimension general communication skills had a reliability Cronbach's alpha of .76. The one-stage cluster sampling technique was used in the actual study where clusters were made up of unemployed graduates who took part in the SLIM programme at three government linked corporations (GLCs). All unemployed graduates in the three clusters chosen were included in the sample. The questionnaires were administered to 506 respondents beginning July 2011 till September 2011. After data cleaning and screening process, only 337 (67%) questionnaires were finally used for analysis using SPSS v.20 software. Face-to-face interviews were carried out with thirteen respondents (N=13) to gain better insights of and respondents' opinions on their experiences at their job interviews. The interview protocol comprised questions similar to those items found in the questionnaire. To ensure confidentiality of the interview candidates, pseudonyms were given to candidates with coding such as C1M to denote candidate number 1, male; while C2F would refer to candidate number 2, female and so on. Data from the questionnaire and interview analysis were triangulated where information from the quantitative data were examined and supported with the qualitative data.

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Respondents' profile

Analysis of the quantitative data showed respondents came from all the fourteen states of Malaysia including Sabah and Sarawak, and more than half of the respondents (62.3%) were females. The high number of unemployment among females was very probably due to the higher percentage of female students studying in

HEIs (DOS, 2011). Major distributions of unemployed graduates were mostly in the age group of 21 – 24 comprising 63.8% of the population sample and the remaining were in the age group of 25 – 28. Results indicated a very high percentage of Malay respondents which was 89.9%, while the Chinese respondents made up 1.8% of the sample population, Indians 4.7% and Others (Indigenous group) 3.6%. These numbers came as no surprise as most respondents were from the IPTAs (79.5%) where the student population are mostly Malays (DOS, 2011). Findings showed a slightly higher proportion of students majoring in Social Science, Arts & Humanities (52.8%) compared to those majoring in the Science and Technology. The highest number of unemployed graduates in this study was those with degrees in Engineering (27%), while the next highest were those who graduated with degrees in Business (24.3%). Analysis of the English language competency of respondents was based on the Malaysian University English Test results (MUET). Results showed the highest number of respondents (45.7%) was in the range of Band 3, labelled ‘Moderate users’ of the English language while Band 2 which indicated ‘Limited users’ of the English language recorded as having the second highest frequency (26.4%) (Appendix A).

4.2 Respondents’ level of general communication skills (GCS)

The percentile rank of the mean scores was used to determine the levels of general communication skills measured as low (>33.3%), moderate (33.4% - 66.6%) or high (66.7% - 99.9%). Results indicated that more than half of the respondents (67.1%) were at a moderate to low level of general communication skills, with mean scores ranging from 1 – 3.83 (Table 1). The data was further supported by the multiple choice questions in the questionnaire where 70.6% of the respondents reported on their inability to elaborate on ideas to support their answers during their interview sessions while 75.4% of the respondents indicated their inability to communicate ideas as the main factor that affect their communication skills.

To corroborate the quantitative findings, the open-ended questions were analysed, and 20.6% of the respondents gave reasons such as “poor speaking skills”, “lack communication skills”, and “poor in understanding” as part of their communication problems. In addition to that, almost all of the respondents were of the opinion that they needed further training in speaking and listening to improve their communication skills. In the face-to-face interview, a respondent referred to as C7F in the study, stated that one of the reasons she has not managed to land a job after more than ten interviews was her lack of communication skills. She was quoted as saying:

Because of my communication skills, lack of communication skills, I have a little bit of confident [little confidence] in communication. I have to improve my communication skills a lot (lah)... so [so that] my performance not [will not be] so poor.

Another respondent, C1M reiterated with a somewhat similar dilemma:

My weakness is communication skills (lah) (pauses) I’m not fluent in English... maybe there are other person [other people] more confident [than me].

From the qualitative analysis, another important finding that emerged from this study was the association between general communication skill and the lack of confidence in communication, or communication apprehension. Results indicated that respondents became anxious during their job interviews since they felt that they lack the general communication skills. C7F and C1M both mentioned their lack of communication skills had a negative effect on their confidence to communicate, (communication apprehension) which in their opinion have led to their poor performance during their job interviews. From these statements, it could be inferred that general communication skills are closely associated with communication apprehension and performance. According to McCroskey and Beatty (1984), students even at tertiary level do experience some level communication apprehension when asked to communicate which often results in negative outcomes for both speakers and

listeners. The problem and impact of communication apprehension can be critical in the job interview context as it has shown to negatively affect performance and outcomes (Ayres et al., 1998).

Both quantitative and qualitative findings showed that the lack of communication skills such as speaking and communicating thoughts and ideas in English were deficiencies that could lead to negative outcomes of job interviews. The low to moderate level of the general communication skills among the unemployed graduates of the study as shown in Table 1 suggested as not meeting the requirements of employers as most employers implicitly require and identify communication skills as a requirement in job listings (Foxworth, 2001; Tucker & McCarthy, 2001) while countless researches validate the importance of communication skills for job applicants (Ascher, 1988; Rynes and Gerhart, 1990). Research showed that the lack of communication skills has led to graduates being less marketable in the realm of local employment (Mohd Lazim Abdullah, 2009; Phang, 2006).

Table 1: Respondents' distribution of levels of general communication skills

Level	Range of Mean Scores	Frequency (f) N=337	Percent (%)
Low	1.00 – 3.33	131	38.9
Moderate	3.34 – 3.83	95	28.2
High	3.84 – 5.00	111	32.9

Tables 2 and 3 show the mean scores of independent samples t-tests and one way analysis of variance results for general communication skills of unemployed graduates based on selected demographic background namely gender, age group, types of HEIs (IPTAs & IPTS), fields of study, and MUET band scores. Overall, t-tests results showed there were significant differences in mean scores for gender where $t(335) = -1.97, p \leq .05$ and types of HEIs where $t(330) = -3.13, p < .05$. The mean scores for gender indicated that males ($M = 3.72, SD = .59$) have higher general communication skills compared to the females ($M = 3.59, SD = .56$). Despite the general assertion that “females are verbally better”, the higher score for general communication skills in males could be explained by the meta-analytical studies carried out by Hyde and Linn (1988), and later, Canary and Hause (1993) that the difference in females being better verbally were so slight as to be meaningless. Studies conducted at local universities among undergraduates also showed similar results with the present study where males have shown to have better communication skills (Abdul Malek Abdul Karim et al. 2012; Mohd Lazim Abdullah, 2009).

Meanwhile, the mean scores showed that respondents from IPTAs ($M = 3.58, SD = .56$) have lower general communication skills compared to those from the IPTS ($M = 3.83, SD = .62$). The findings could be due to several plausible reasons. With the more varied ethnic population found in most IPTS, there is a greater chance of English being spoken and used as a medium of communication amongst students compared to the higher percentage of the Malay population in the IPTAs where students are generally more competent and comfortable speaking in Bahasa Malaysia. Another possible reason for the better competency in the general communication skills among the IPTS unemployed graduates may be due to English used as the primary medium of instruction at those higher education institutions compared to the courses offered at many public universities which are often taught in Bahasa Malaysia. Wong & James (2000) state that students' mastery of a language cannot be expected to attain a certain level when the language is not used as a medium for academic discourse (cited in Gill, 2008).

Apart from gender and the types of HEIs, analysis of the independent t-test did not show any statistically significant difference between age groups and fields of study in relation to general communication skills.

Table 2: Mean scores and independent t-tests of general communication skills according to demographic variables

Variable	N	Mean (M)	Std Deviation	t	df	p	Findings
Gender				-1.97	335	.05	Significant difference
Male	127	3.72	0.59				
Female	210	3.59	0.56				
Age Groups				.39	335	.70	No significant difference
21 – 24	215	3.65	0.55				
25 – 28	122	3.63	0.62				
Types of HEIs	268	3.59	0.56	-3.13	330	.002	Significant difference
IPTA	64	3.83	0.59				
IPTS							
Fields of Study				-.37	328	.24	No significant difference
Social Science, Arts & Humanities	178	3.68	0.58				
S & T	152	3.60	0.57				

The one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that there were significant differences among the MUET band scores and general communication skills where $F = 17.97$, $p < .05$. In comparing the means, as expected, results suggested that unemployed graduates whose MUET band score were 5 had the highest general communication skills (Mean = 4.13, SD = 0.68). MUET band score 4 totaled up as the second highest (Mean = 4.01, SD = 0.55) and MUET band score 3 (Mean = 3.60, SD = 0.48) as the next highest and so on. These results indicated that the higher the MUET band score, the higher the general communication skills of unemployed graduates were. These results were consistent with the expected trend where those higher in their English competency would probably have higher communication skills than those who are less competent in their communication skills (McCroskey, 1982).

Table 3: Results of ANOVA for general communication competence according to MUET band scale

Variable MUET Band Score	N	Mean	Std Deviation	F	p	Findings
GCS (Between groups)				17.974	.000	Significant difference
Band 1	7	3.309	.729			
Band 2	89	3.385	.539			
Band 3	154	3.590	.477			
Band 4	77	4.006	.548			
Band 5	10	4.133	.684			

5. Implications and conclusion

Findings of the study have yielded better understanding of unemployed graduates' demographic characteristics in terms of gender, types of HEIs, fields of study and English competencies based on their MUET results and their implications on their levels of general communication skills at job interviews. Inferential statistics showed statistical differences in gender, types of HEIs and MUET band scores in relation to general communication skills. One limitation of the study was that respondents were required to comment on their communication competence with specific focus on the English language during their job interviews. As the

English language is the second or the third language of communication to almost all of the respondents, some biasness may have occurred when they were answering the questionnaire or questions during face-to-face interviews. Another limitation was that most respondents came from the IPTAs, as such generalizations can only be assumed to that particular group of respondents. However, the study actually provided an indication of job interview communication competence from the respondents' perspectives.

Respondents in this study perceived themselves as possessing a generally moderate to low levels of general communication skills. These moderate to low level of general communication skills amongst the respondents could have contributed to their unemployed status as literature have suggested that the ability to communicate competently as vital for success at job interviews. This finding corresponded to those previous studies which specified communication competence as one of the main determinants of whether a graduate will be hired (Mohd Lazim Abdullah, 2009; Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000; Yorke & Knight, 2004).

Findings indicated that unemployed graduates from the private higher education institutes (IPTs) have better general communication skills than those from the public higher education institutes (IPTAs). This implied that there are still problems on communication skills among students in the IPTAs where the student population is made up of mostly Malays. HEIs in Malaysia have been urged by the government to develop soft skills among students through co-curricular activities, course subjects and elective courses (Ministry of Higher Education, 2006). However, based on the findings of the study, it can be assumed that developing soft skills via the co-curricular activities and subjects at the tertiary level have not shown much result. Follow-up steps should be taken by the universities to ensure the optimum level of communication skills among students are met by revising the curriculum, and creating awareness among students of the importance of communication skills in the working world.

Quantitative analysis showed that female unemployed graduates have lower general communication skills than males. One implication that can be drawn from this finding is that due to this, females may face more difficulties and higher competition at job interviews. Female graduates need to be more aggressive communicators. They need to break the general notion that females are usually passive and shy, thus employers trend in preferring to employ more males (Noor Azina Ismail, 2011). Shyness and reticence in communication have been found to lead to communication apprehension, especially in job interview situations (Ayres et al., 1998). Employers generally want graduates who have positive perceptions of themselves that are marked by confidence and optimism (Harvey, 2000).

The other equally important finding of the study is the association between general communication skills and communication apprehension. This finding opens up the prospect for further research, that general communication skills need to be assessed in relation to communication apprehension among university students. The implication of this finding is that it is vital that universities ensure their students possess the necessary general communication skills, and are abled communicators of the English language as it follows that being competent communicators, graduates also become more confident individuals. Students who possess high general communication skills with an extensive command of the language would have more confidence in discussing their knowledge and ideas and will be in a better position at job interviews. The integration of communication skills in the course syllabus could only lead to the strengthening of general communication skills, confident communicators and individuals and thus graduates who are more marketable. This is very much in line with one of the Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011 – 2015 (10MP) objectives where the performance of universities will be based on graduate employability and methods of teaching and learning (The Economic Planning Unit, 2010).

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Appendix A. Respondents' MUET results

MUET Results	Competency	Frequency (f) N=337	Percent (%)
Band 6	Very good user	-	-
Band 5	Good user	10	3.0
Band 4	Competent user	77	22.8
Band 3	Modest user	154	45.7
Band 2	Limited user	89	26.4
Band 1	Extremely limited user	7	2.1
Total		337	100