TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION IN MALAYSIAN SKILL-BASED INSTITUTIONS: THE NEED FOR PEDAGOGICAL EVOLUTION

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Abstract

Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates are expected to be competent in communicating technical information at workplace. Technical communication is perceived as a substantial component that needs to be emphasized in TVET institutions to increase employability of graduates. However, most TVET graduates possess poor communication skills. This paper discusses pedagogical issues faced by the educators in TVET institutions. Most of the educators encounter challenges in terms of handling mixed ability students, getting the students to respond in English, lack of confidence among students, students' negative learning attitudes, shortage of technical communication specialists, lack of collaboration with industry and lack of technological knowledge.

Keywords: Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET), Technical Communication, Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Skill-based institutions are established to provide employment opportunities for students through their specialized Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes. The term Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) was initially used to refer to the acquisition of practical skills, know-how and understanding necessary for employment in an occupation, trade or group of occupations or trades (UNESCO, 1997). Its concept was mainly to supply manpower for skill-based industry through a specialised syllabus. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2001 revised the concept of TVET for the twenty-first century by defining TVET as the *"aspects of the educational process involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and related sciences, and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupants in various sectors of economic and social life"* (UNESCO & ILO, 2002; pg 7).

In the twenty-first century TVET does not merely supply workers for a specific industry, but it emphasises on skill-based education system that is central to the development of skills and human capital who are competent within and outside an organization.

Employability of TVET Graduates

The overall unemployment rate of Malaysian graduates in 2018 and 2019 recorded a total of 3.3% (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2019). According to the stakeholders in the labor market, lack-of quality skills-based and job relevant training, outdated curricula and poor soft-skills especially declining English proficiency are the three main skills challenges in Malaysia (Song & Tang, 2016).

To be specific, an employability survey was conducted by TalentCorp among employers in Malaysia in 2014. About 81% of the respondents indicated that fresh graduates lack communication skills (Song & Tang, 2016). Employers as well as the fresh graduates themselves perceive that having poor communication skills is one of the

main reasons for graduates to be unemployed (Omar & Rajoo, 2016; Shamsuddin, Isa, Aziz, Mahfol, & Alagari, 2013).

The labour market has become more competitive and demands more from the TVET graduates in this rapidly changing world. TVET graduates are not only expected to equip themselves with necessary technical skills but they are also expected to be competent at English language and effective communication skills (Majumdar, 2011; World Bank East Asia and Pacific Regional Report, 2012; Nurkholis & Petrick, 2014). Besides that, several firms feel that younger employees often do not show sufficient respect to older, more experienced employees (Kraak, Paterson & Boka, 2016).

In Malaysia, skill-specialised programmes are offered for various industries such as automotive, culinary arts, agriculture, food science, plumbing and so on and so forth by the public and private institutions. Since TVET prepares graduates for a specific skill area, graduates are expected to be competent at communicating technical information with their team, mentors and customers. However, in most TVET institutions teaching of English is generalized instead of specializing it according to industry. Consequently, graduates struggle in making their meaning clear at their workplace. Subsequently, producing multi-skilled graduates has become a great challenge for most TVET institutions all over the world.

Technical Communication

Technical communication is defined as a process of gathering, organizing, presenting and refining information (Collier & Toomey, 1997). Technical communication includes both written and oral communication. In technical fields, information is communicated via short and long reports on projects, technical articles, operation manual, website and many more. Therefore, technical communication is viewed as "scientific, technological, engineering, business, legal, regulatory, managerial or social scientific information" (DiSanza & Legge, 2002). Field related registers are commonly used in technical communication. However, the emphasis on English syllabi has shifted from English for specific purposes to communicative English (Abdullah & Majid, 2013). Since communicative English promote interaction in a wide variety of social situations, most lecturers opt for general communicative tasks rather than emphasizing on the usage of specific field-related corpora.

Pedagogical Issues in TVET Institutions

In this digital era, TVET educators face a number of challenges in ensuring the delivery of effective and meaningful lessons especially in TVET institutions. One of the issues that challenges most TVET educators is handling classes consist students with mixed ability. According to Abdullah and Majid (2013), polytechnic students are good at content-based subjects but relatively poor in their language command. Most of the tasks in the modules that were given to them not suitable for all levels. This causes difficulties for the educators to adapt tasks in order to suit their students' ability (Sanmugam & Harun, 2013). Basically, students who enroll TVET programmes are required to have a minimum entry requirement. However, certain programmes do not even require them to have a passing grade for enrolment. This creates a difficult situation for the English lecturers as they have to deal with the high and low proficient students who are placed in the same class.

According to Sanmugam & Harun (2013) getting students to respond in English is a challenging task for most lecturers in TVET institutions. They are reluctant to speak not because they do not understand the subject matter but merely due to their low level of proficiency in the language (Sanmugam & Harun, 2013). Apart from grammar and vocabulary community college learners are also proven to be weak at phonetics (Kim, Azmi & Teh, 2017). The interview findings revealed that, the learners of polytechnic Kuala Terengganu self-confessed that their weak pronunciation is due to lack of exposure to the language. Most learners in this polytechnic do not use English to converse with their friends and lecturers. They claimed that they have no opportunity to use the language neither in the class nor at home. In addition, they also claimed that they do not have a role model to pronounce words correctly as their lecturers do not speak English and they are lazy to learn on their own (Kim, Azmi & Teh, 2017). This indicates that, these learners are completely reliant on the lecturers and do not take responsibility for their own learning. This results in not having the confidence in speaking English (Kim, Azmi & Teh, 2017).

This lack of confidence among TVET learners causes them to be hesitant to experiment what they know and do not know. In fact, students' hesitancy to be actively involved in classroom activities does not improve their confidence in using the target language (Abdullah & Majid, 2013; Sanmugam & Harun, 2013). Hence, they are considered as 'not work-ready' graduates for future employment. Khatib & Maarof (2015) conducted a study on Self-efficacy perception of oral communication ability among English as a Second Language (ESL) Technical

Students in one of the Malaysian polytechnic colleges. It was found that 60 students who participated in this study possessed low self-efficacy beliefs. This indicates that, they showed low confidence in their ability to communicate in English. This implies that technical college students are still weak in mastering the English language. Many students even have to let go their ambitions due to poor command in English (Murali, 2015). Lack of proficiency in English language will make them less marketable on the job market. The current students and graduates are not satisfied with the current teaching and learning, and they perceive this as a factor for not being proficient in English language (Khatib & Maarof, 2015). Consequently, many seek for a change in the curriculum which could best prepare the students to face the real world.

Next, inappropriate attitude towards learning English indeed challenges the TVET English lecturers (Abdullah & Majid, 2013). Since TVET programmes mainly emphasise on technical and vocational skills, learners give less importance to English language. They are very much focused on improving their technical skills rather than enhancing their soft skills. Therefore, they often become inattentive and passive due to lack of interest in enhancing their language proficiency.

Moreover, there is a shortage of educators who are specialized in teaching technical modules in Malaysia (Hussin et al., 2016). Most educators are recruited right after they graduate from universities based on their academic qualifications with no experience and industry exposure (Hussin et al., 2016). There are also institutions which instruct the lecturers who are not specialized in English education to teach and develop modules. This was proven in a study conducted by Shamsudin and Sanmugam (2015) on the Polytechnic lecturers' readiness to teach ESP courses or technical modules. Basically, the result revealed that most of the lecturers hold the minimal qualification which is bachelor degree. According to the researchers, most of the lecturers agreed that they have lack of content- specific knowledge; they are not ready to teach technical modules and not ready to develop and design technical based modules. This is because, TESL trainees are mainly trained on proficiency-based teaching instead of specializing in teaching content-specific modules. As such most educators feel that teaching technical modules is challenging (Shanmugam and Harun, 2013). It was reported that, they are facing difficulties in teaching technical modules as they are not familiar with the English technical terms (Sanmugam & Harun, 2013). The general English language education programme does not train the trainee teachers to teach technical modules. Hence, the hiring of teachers / lecturers who had not undergone any form of technical teaching courses leads to difficulties for the lecturers to cope with industry related technical registers. In fact, communicating ideas and conveying information using technical terms challenge most lecturers. As a result, the effectiveness of teaching and learning becomes less apparent. Therefore, exposure to specialized or technical vocabularies is kept to minimal use and teaching and learning is made more general instead of being specific to TVET context. Besides that, industry related facts and examples of current practices are also kept to minimal during lessons.

Besides, most lecturers do not collaborate with their industry partners to obtain their insights on current practices and knowledge and skills expected from the graduates. The Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016-2020) states that there will be more skill-based jobs created (Economic Planning Unit, 2015). However, it was found that there have been mismatch of skills required by the industry and the skills attained by the graduates especially those enrolled TVET programmes. According to Aring (2015), these high-skill mismatches suggest that the quality of TVET is low in many ASEAN countries. This is due to the lack of industry input in curriculum design (Aring, 2015). As a result, most lecturers are unaware of industry needs. Consequently, they are unable to develop modules that help to produce work-ready graduates.

Apart from that, the advancement in technology is simplifying most of the tasks done by humans. It has been making significant transformations in many fields including TVET education. As such, the need of technology integration has become common in higher learning institutions as it provides a better learning platform for the current digital natives. However, Ustati & Ismail (2013) reported that lecturers' lack of knowledge in handling multimedia software tools in digital language lab affects their interest in integrating them in teaching of English language. Despite undergoing trainings on digital language lab system management, lecturers are still facing problems in handling them effectively as they are reluctant to integrate them. They often spend most of their classroom time on troubleshooting. In addition, most students are unable to cope with language learning via digital language lab system due to poor language proficiency (Ustati & Ismail, 2013). Instead of showing initiatives in learning the language using the digital language lab tools, they misuse the given opportunities and facilities provided to them by plagiarising their work from the internet sources. This raises questions on the originality and quality of the work produced (Ustati & Ismail, 2013). As a result, their classroom management and time management directly get affected (Ustati & Ismail, 2013).

The Need for Pedagogical Evolution

Pedagogical practices in TVET institutions need be revolutionized to provide better learning experiences for the students. Most lecturers are using outdated syllabi which contain topics which are no longer practiced by the industry. Due to the advancement in technology, processes, concepts and ideas are evolving to cater to the modern practices. Therefore, educators are urged to review and revise the existing modules in line with the industry requirement (Amin, 2016; Chinedu & Mohamed, 2017; Rasul et al. 2015 & Wijayanto, 2017). This will recreate opportunities for them to apply modern TVET methods and concepts in delivering the module effectively (Grosch, 2017). As such, educators should also develop modules that are customized for the industry that the institution is targeting for its graduates to secure employments after their course of study. This will increase their employability as graduates who are competent at communicating technical information within the industry are perceived as all-rounders.

Besides, educators are encouraged to collaborate with the industry experts to design their educational programmes based on the industry input (Grosch, 2017). It was found that there have been mismatch of skills required by the industry and the skills attained by the graduates especially those enrolled TVET programmes. According to Aring (2015), these high-skill mismatches suggest that the quality of TVET is low in many ASEAN countries. This is due to the lack of industry input in curriculum design (Aring, 2015). As such, collaboration with industry will help in the inclusion of topics that are relevant to today and future needs.

Moreover, to improve the quality of teaching and learning in higher education institutions (HEI), the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) states that HEIs should undertake curriculum reviews at two-or-three intervals, taking into consideration the views of academicians, industrial experts, government officials and members of non-governmental organizations (Weiss, 2014). Moreover, it was also stressed that curricular transformation should strive toward achieving proficiency in English language. HEIs are also expected to leverage on the innovative teaching to enhance learning experiences (Weiss, 2014). Therefore, educators should integrate technological tools in their teaching of technical communication.

CONCLUSION

TVET students need to equip themselves with not only technical skills but they are also required to be competent at communicating technical information within their respective industry. General English modules in TVET institutions need to be phased out to develop technical communication modules that are relevant for the current industry. In other words, different set of technical communication module needs to be developed for different industry. This will allow experiential learning for the students to explore work-related situations from their respective industry. Educators should employ engaging teaching methods to encourage students' participation and their interest in learning.

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