Chapter 8

Engineering Students' Self–Perceived Communication Competence and Technical Presentation Anxiety:
A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

To work in a global context, engineering graduates must be competent professionally as well as be proficient communicators in English, the language widely used in international business (Lee, 2003). Increasingly, engineering graduates need to learn and develop skills about existing technical areas in order to enhance their competitiveness in today's global marketplace. The Malaysian Engineering Accreditation Council Policy (EACP, 2005) has listed effective communication skills as one of the main competencies that all Malaysian engineering graduates need to master. One of the important communication skills that engineers must develop is the ability to communicate ideas and concepts to a group of people through formal and informal oral presentations. In line with the EAC policy, Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP) has taken proactive steps in integrating oral English communication skills in their curriculum and co-curriculum activities. This chapter aims to examine the correlation of engineering students' perceived communication competence and their level of apprehension in giving a technical presentation. Questionnaires, adapted from McCroskey's (1988) Self-Perceived Communication Competence

and Richmond & McCroskey's (1985) Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety, were distributed to 140 final year UMP engineering undergraduates who were preparing for their Undergraduate Research Report presentation. The results of the study have direct and indirect implications to the teaching and learning of oral presentation skills to engineering undergraduates.

INTRODUCTION

Within the backdrop of intense globalization activities, Malaysia is progressing and advancing actively towards extensive economic transformation where it aims to be a developed nation by the year 2020. Having a dynamic business environment, technological advancement and well-developed infrastructure, Malaysia is indeed well positioned to play a role in today's competitive world. With current Malaysian strategic economic planning emphasizing on a knowledge-based economy, grooming human capital has become the major concern of the Malaysian government. Furthermore, as human capital is one of Malaysia's greatest assets, great emphasis has been accorded towards ensuring demands from expanding manufacturing and services sectors will be met. In order to cater for these sectors, workforce supplied must not only be technically skillful, but they must also be competent in the global language, English. With the current global economic situation, having sound technical knowledge and being highly proficient in English (especially in oral communication) have become critical elements for Malaysian employees to attain in today's workplace contexts. The recent Malaysian Employment Federation (MEF) Survey reveals that "the most important trait employers look for in prospective employees is verbal and written communication in English" (Hariati Azizan & Lee, 2011, p. 1). The MEF Salary Survey for Executives 2010 revealed that "68% of the companies surveyed named communication skills in English as the top quality required in job applicants, followed by working experience (67%), interpersonal skills (56.2%) and passion and commitment (55.7%)" (Hariati Azizan & Lee, 2011, p. 1). Possessing good communication skills in English is seen as a crucial asset in the workforce as this essential competence will go a long way in helping Malaysia to play a more competitive role in ensuring that we do not get marginalised in today's global social and economic environment.

Oral English Communication Skills in the Workplace: Malaysian Context

The concept of today's increasingly borderless world makes it necessary for Malaysian graduates to be well exposed to a wide range of abilities as well as being highly proficient in English. English is the global official language in both business and other corporate sectors (Megat Johari et al., 2002; Mohd Faisal Hanapiah, 2002). Many research studies have been conducted to investigate English communication needs in Malaysian professional contexts which emphasize oral communication competence in English, in particular. In recent media coverage on the importance of English, MEF executive director Shamsudin Bardan reports that communication skills in English was seen as "an essential criterion even for professions traditionally seen as 'backroom' staff such as engineers, technical personnel and scientists" (Hariati Azizan & Lee, 2011, p. 1). In the business world for example, sales personnel play important roles in developing the company especially in the areas of product promotions and product selling. Leong (2001) who aimed to identify key communicative events carried out by sales personnel found that English is widely used in all spoken and written communication. Having high proficiency in spoken English is an expected skill among sales personnel so that they can perform their job efficiently as they need to ex-

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