

An Investigation into the Communicative Needs in Sales in a Malaysian Business Context

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Abstract

Successful selling of products or services is vital for the survival and growth of business organizations and sales personnel play an important role in this respect. As one of the most commonly cited criteria for any sales related job in Malaysia is good communication skills in English, it is crucial, therefore, for sales personnel to be equipped with these skills so that they can perform effectively in their job. This paper looks at the communicative needs of sales personnel of a Malaysian owner-managed group of companies. More specifically, it focuses on the productive skills of speaking and writing which sales personnel need in their job. It examines the types of communicative events sales personnel are involved in and hence, discusses the communication skills that they need. An ethnographic approach to needs analysis has been employed in the study in order to give it an "insider-member's" knowledge of the communicative needs of the sales personnel. The study showed that sales personnel needed to communicate in English both in the spoken and written modes. Consequently, they needed to be equipped with a repertoire of communication skills in English in order to perform effectively in their job. These findings have important pedagogical implications for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) particularly in the teaching of Business English. Furthermore, the insights into the actual communicative needs of sales personnel in the workplace will help ESP practitioners, course designers and materials developers to design better and more relevant programs for the training of sales personnel.

Introduction

Successful selling of products or services is vital for the survival and growth of business organizations and sales personnel play an important role in this respect. A quick survey of the job advertisements in the newspaper reveals that one of the most commonly cited criteria for sales related jobs in Malaysia is good communication skill in English. Therefore, it is crucial for sales personnel to be equipped with the communication skills necessary for successful sales transactions. Globalization and the advent of the e-business or e-commerce have reinforced the status of English as the international language for business communication. With trade liberalization, Malaysia has become more involved in international trading and thus, sales personnel who are competent in the language of the international markets will certainly have a competitive edge.

This paper is based on a study conducted among sales personnel of a Malaysian owner-managed group of companies. It is an attempt to investigate the communicative needs of sales personnel by means of an ethnographic approach to needs analysis. A macro view of the key communicative events that sales personnel are involved in and the communication skills that they need to perform effectively in their job will be presented with a focus on the productive skills of speaking and writing.

Background

There have been many calls for a greater involvement of ESP in the world of professions. Bhatia(1994: 19), for instance, points out that "it is not enough for ESP professionals to look at language trying to bridge the gap between language and the professions; they need to make significant inroads in the world of professions, especially in the form of relevant ESP research output". This study has been undertaken in response to such calls.

Although Business English has experienced rapid growth, research in language use in business contexts is still lagging. Holden(1989:43) comments that "we know surprisingly little about language usage and performance in business contexts and in relation to companies' quest for resources and strategic advantage.how people use language in business contexts". Johns (1993) expresses the need for local ESP practitioners to conduct locally-based research. Thus, one other reason for undertaking this study is to fulfill the need for more research in the Malaysian business context.

Of the few Malaysian ESP studies that have been documented, most have been confined to the study of multi-national companies (MNCs) because it is generally known that English is used in such organizations (see Ainol Haryati Ibrahim, 1993 and Sargunan, 1997). However, I feel that studies should also focus on the smaller locally owned companies because in terms of economic contribution, MNCs only account for a small proportion of the country's economy. Small and Medium Industries (SMIs) have been targeted to grow in line with Malaysia's vision of becoming an industrialized nation (Vision 2020) and will eventually form the backbone of the Malaysian economy. Therefore, the needs of this important sector for skilled manpower should be looked into.

The importance of sales in business is yet another reason why I have chosen to study this particular occupational group. In any business, if nothing were sold, goods would pile up at the warehouses and massive unemployment would follow. Any company concerned with either selling services or goods would be crippled if it were unsuccessful in selling its products. Thus, sales personnel play a crucial role in any business.

In recent years, the demand for Business English has escalated and there has been a mushrooming of such courses for professionals in Malaysia. The popularity of such courses is due to the fact that English Language skills have always been shown to correlate highly with professional success and achievement and, thus, economic development (Goh & Chan, 1993). However, successful ESP courses require careful research and design of pedagogical materials and activities for an identifiable group of adult learners within a specific learning context (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991). In

order to design programs that meet the specified needs of learners, a thorough needs analysis must be conducted prior to the setting up of the ESP course.

Terms and definitions

Due to a proliferation of definitions in the extant literature, it is necessary at this juncture to define some of the terms that I have used in the study. The sales personnel in the study belong to a discourse community, which is a group of people who share certain language-using practices and are bound to certain conventions adhered to by members of the same group (Swales, 1990).

As the study encompasses a target situation analysis, communicative needs refers to all the necessary communication skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading) that sales personnel are expected to have in order to carry out their job effectively from the perspective of the discourse community in which they function.

One of the concerns of the study has been to identify the communicative events that sales personnel are involved in. I have adopted the notion of communicative event which according to Saville-Troike (1982:29):

Is defined by a unified set of components throughout, beginning with the same general purpose of communication, the same general topic, and involving the same participants, generally using the same language variety, maintaining the same tone or key for interaction, in the same setting.

A communicative event comprises not only the discourse itself and its participants, but also the role of the discourse and the environment of its production and reception (Swales, 1990).

The study draws on ethnographic tools of analysis. The term "ethnographic" has its origins in anthropology where it refers to the study of people's behavior in naturally occurring, ongoing settings, with a focus on the cultural interpretation of behavior (Hymes, 1982).

In the course of the study, reference will be made to communicative competence, which refers to both knowledge and skill in using the knowledge when interacting in actual communication. Mention will also be made of the four areas of knowledge and skill that form the components of communicative competence; grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. The definitions of these terms according to Canale and Swain (1980) are as follows:

Grammatical competence refers to mastery of the language code

Sociolinguistic competence refers to the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts

Discourse competence is concerned with how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres

Strategic competence refers to the mastery of communication strategies to:

- (a) compensate for breakdown in communication
- (b) enhance the effectiveness of communication

The ethnographic method

The study adopts a pragmatic view of language and draws on ethnography of communication which is defined in *The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (1985: 97) as:

the study of language in culture and society. Language is not studied in isolation, but within a social and/or cultural setting. Ethnography of communication studies, for example, how people in a particular group or community communicate with each other and how the social relationships between these people affect the type of language they use.

One reason for adopting an ethnographic approach in the study is because it allows for observation of language use in-situ. Studies have shown that the advantage the ethnographic approach has over other methods is that the researcher no longer remains an outsider but becomes instead an "insider-member" of the discourse community observing how the language is used by its members (Ramani, Chako, Singh & Glendinning, 1988; Ainol Haryati Ibrahim, 1993; Noraini Ibrahim, 1997). Such an approach enables the researcher to gain insider knowledge and helps to remove some of the "guesswork" that is said to be prevalent among ESP teachers "who have never been near the place where the target language is spoken" (Roe, 1993: 10).

Research design

The study involved two stages; pre-field and in the field. During the pre-field stage, firstly, I identified and specified the sales personnel who formed the subjects of the study. The sales personnel were staff of a group of companies specializing in the supply of specialist electrical equipment. Next, I sought the permission of the "gatekeepers" in order to gain access and negotiate entry into the discourse community. Much of the groundwork such as finding out about the background of the company was carried out at this stage.

The sales personnel were then observed by "shadowing" them while they were on the job. The questionnaire was administered and the sales personnel were interviewed and asked about their communication practices, needs and problems. At this stage, I also sought the help of the specialist informants who have played an integral part in the study by providing useful information, which helped in the description, analysis and clarification of genres (Bhatia, 1993). These informants were carefully selected following Selinker's (1979) characteristics for specialist informants. According to Selinker, a specialist informant should be a competent and trained specialist member of the disciplinary culture, have a feel for the specialist language and is in a position to explain clearly what he believes expert members of the disciplinary culture do when they exploit language in order to accomplish their generic goals. Besides being a source of information, the specialist informants also assisted in explaining and verifying the data.

Research tools and data analysis

Five different tools were used in collecting data for the study namely informants, semi-structured interviews, questionnaire, observations and examination of

documents. The interviews were all tape recorded and transcribed. Field notes were taken throughout the observations. The data was analyzed and cross-checked with the specialist informants. To validate the findings, triangulation of data was used. The data analysis followed a recursive non-linear pattern and was carried out in a holistic, systematic and organized manner so as to avoid the analysis from being "anecdotal and meandering" (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). Thus, in order to achieve a "holistic" presentation, the data gathered through the various research tools was analyzed individually. I then sorted out the issues relevant to the present study and identified the patterns that emerged from the multiple data. Finally, these issues were linked to the research question.

Findings

In this study, I was interested in discovering the key communicative events that are recognized within the discourse community of the sales personnel under study. Thus, a macro view of the key communicative events in which the sales personnel participate and the corresponding communication skills that they need will be presented in this paper. However, I am fully aware of the importance of the other components such as, the rules for interaction and the norms of interpretation. Nevertheless, these will not be discussed here because a discussion on these components would involve microanalyses of the communicative events that are beyond the scope of the present paper.

One of the research questions in the study was aimed at finding out the types of languages used by the sales personnel. It was found that English was the predominant language used. Thus, in the following discussion, communicative needs pertain to English Language communication skills.

The communicative events

It is felt that the identification of the different communicative events would pave the way for the identification of the different skills sales personnel require to function effectively in these communicative situations. For the discussion, I will divide the communicative events into the spoken and written channels.

Communicative events (spoken)

The ability to close as many sales deals as possible is the main aim of a sales personnel. In the study I have examined and analyzed the process of closing a sales deal and have found that it involved a number of different communicative events. Table 1 provides a summary of the communication practices in the sales process and the corresponding communicative events that are involved as disclosed by the sales personnel during the interviews.

Table 1 : Communication practices and communicative events

Steps in the sales process	Communication practices	Communicative events
1	Prospecting for potential clients	Telephone conversations
2	Contacting clients	Telephone conversations
3	Meeting consultant engineers	Meetings
4	Introducing and explaining the product and/range of products to contractors and owners	Product promotions: Sales presentations, seminars, product demonstrations, exhibitions
5	Persuading and convincing the contractors to buy the products	Meetings
6	Negotiating the price	Meetings, price negotiations
7	Coordinating with the clients, servicing clients	Telephone conversations, correspondence, meetings
8	Visiting the site	Meetings
9	Following up with delivery of the products	Telephone conversations, meetings, correspondence
10	Collecting payments	Meetings, telephone conversations, correspondence

From Table 1 above, it can be seen that the sales personnel often participated in communicative events such as telephone conversations, meetings, sales presentations, seminars and exhibitions. The following sub-sections will discuss each of these communicative events in turn.

Telephone conversations

The findings showed that the most frequent communicative event that the sales personnel took part in was the telephone conversation. All the sales personnel in the study acknowledged the fact that the telephone was an indispensable tool for them to prospect for clients, contact them and then, to follow through the whole sales deal right up to the provision of after sales service. In addition, the sales personnel regarded the telephone conversation as the fastest and most convenient mode to do sales and was preferable to writing. Often, writing was used as a follow-up after the telephone conversation.

Meetings

Second in importance as a communicative event for the sales personnel, was meetings. The study revealed that there were basically two types of meetings - the formal meetings involving mostly "business talk" and the informal or casual social meetings or "social talk". Although the study had focused on meetings with clients, it was found that sales personnel also had frequent meetings amongst themselves and

with their superiors. In addition to these the sales personnel in this organization often had to meet clients such as contractors, owners of buildings and others, such as consultants, suppliers and principals. Another important finding in this study was that the "social meeting" was considered extremely important in the sales personnel's job. This was because the sales personnel need to maintain a close relationship with their clients and consultants. This was often accomplished through socializing with the clients and consultants by entertaining them in non-business settings like playing golf with them or meeting them for lunch or dinner. This "socializing" aspect of the sales personnel's job was considered quite important as it helped them to both maintain and expand their social network.

Product promotions

Besides the telephone conversations and meetings, the other key communicative events were sales presentations, product demonstrations, seminars and exhibitions. These events represented important steps in the sales deal, as they were a means of introducing and explaining the products to the clients. The sales personnel in this particular organization dealt with specialized technical equipment and it was important for their clients to understand the technical aspects of the equipment.

All these different communicative events have implications on the types of communication skills that sales personnel need for successful performance in their job. These skills will be discussed in a later section.

Communicative events (written)

Writing in English also features as a key communicative event in the sales personnel's job. Although the telephone was often the preferred form of communication, the study uncovered the fact that writing was very important to the sales personnel. This was because according to the specialist informants all business transactions needed to be documented so that in the event of disagreements or disputes, documents such as letters, faxes, sales and purchase agreements can be produced in a court of law as evidence. The owner of the organization was particularly insistent that sales personnel had to put in writing whatever agreements they had made with their clients, principals or suppliers because verbal agreements would not suffice in the business community. Thus, matters such as agreements on delivery dates, payments, sales and purchase orders must be documented.

In the questionnaire the sales personnel were asked to indicate the types of business correspondence that they found to be most relevant or applicable to their job. The findings are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Documents most relevant to sales personnel

Documents (types and subtypes)	Sales personnel's responses (%)
i) Letters	
inquiry	73.68
reply to inquiry	78.95
complaint	26.32
reply to complaint	42.11
quotation	73.68
sales/product introduction	47.37
sales coordination	52.63
others	10.53
ii) Memos	
instructional	36.84
informational	84.21
iii) Reports	
assessment	36.84
progress	84.21
iv) Proposals	
tender	26.32
sales	84.21
others	26.32

Data elicited from the questionnaire responses revealed that the types of letters the sales personnel had to write included letters of inquiry and replies to inquiry, complaints and replies to complaints, quotations, sales/product introduction, sales coordination and the other type of letter specified was the project co-ordination letters.

Besides letters, the sales personnel also had to write informational and instructional memos, which were mostly for internal communication. The types of reports they had to write included assessment reports, and progress reports. The latter were more frequently written. However, not all the sales personnel were required to write reports. Only those who were holding managerial posts had to do so. Some of the sales personnel also had to write proposals, mainly sales proposal. Once again, only sales staff in the upper echelon such as the sales managers and sales directors had to write proposals. The other types of proposals listed by the sales personnel were project design, products and marketing proposals.

The questionnaires, interviews and examination of written documents all confirmed that most of the business correspondence was in the form of the facsimile (fax). During the field observation, the specialist informants mentioned that the fax machine was one of the most important tools for the sales personnel besides the hand phone. The fax mode was preferred to the conventional letter because of its speed and ease. Moreover, it was considered official and legally recognized.

The sales personnel corresponded with mostly clients, local and foreign principals and suppliers. Data sought from the questionnaire survey showed that the frequency of the different types of correspondence that the sales personnel needed to write in the order of descending frequency was as follows: quotation, inquiry, reply to inquiry, sales co-ordination, sales/product introduction, complaint and adjustment.

In the questionnaire, 21% of the sales personnel revealed that they used the e-mail but it was for personal correspondence only. At the time of the study according to the managing director, computer literacy was still relatively low among the sales staff and also their clients. As such correspondence was still mainly done via the fax. However, in the future, the employer was aware that his sales staff would need to use the e-mail due to the proliferation and increasing importance of information technology in business.

The communication skills

In the discussion that follows, reference will be made to the communicative events that have already been established in the preceding discussion. I will relate the types of skills that the sales personnel need to the communicative events they are involved in. The discussion will focus specifically on the speaking and writing skills. Table 3 below provides a summary of these skills needed by the sales personnel according to the specialist informants.

Table 3 Communication skills needed by sales personnel

Communicative event: Spoken	Skill
Telephone conversations	Pronunciation, stress, & intonation Vocabulary Concise & precise sentences Active listening Questioning technique
Meetings / formal & informal	Vocabulary Awareness of conversation rules (example: turn-taking) Awareness of paralinguistic features (example: body language) Small talk or social talk Negotiating/bargaining Conflict solving

Communicative event: written	Skill
Sales presentations, product promotions, seminars and exhibitions	Vocabulary Pronunciation, stress, intonation Awareness of paralinguistic features (example: eye contact) Questioning techniques Active listening Audience awareness
Letters of inquiry and replies to inquiry, complaints and replies to complaints, Quotations, sales/product introduction, sales coordination and project co-ordination letters.	Rhetorical awareness Audience awareness Vocabulary
Informational and instructional memos,	Rhetorical awareness Audience awareness Vocabulary
Assessment and progress reports.	Rhetorical awareness Audience awareness Vocabulary
Sales proposal, project design, product and marketing proposals.	Rhetorical awareness Audience awareness Vocabulary

Speaking skills

It has been mentioned earlier that the communicative events, sales personnel partake in, required them to have different skills in order to be able to handle the respective communication situations effectively. It has been established earlier that English-speaking skill was crucial for the sales personnel to carry out their job efficiently and effectively. They needed to have a variety of speaking skills that would enable them to deal with the different types of communicative events such as telephone conversations, meetings, sales presentations, product promotions, seminars and exhibitions. However, the specialists informants pointed out that active listening skill which involved speaking in the format of paraphrasing and summarizing was equally important although the sales personnel in this organization has somewhat underrated its importance.

As mentioned earlier, the telephone conversation is an important communicative event in the sales personnel's job. As such, it was pertinent for them to have telephone speaking skills. In a telephone conversation, the speaker and listener cannot see each other and hence, are unable to make use of other non-verbal cues like body language or eye contact to help them understand the message. Thus, to be effective as a speaker on the telephone, the sales personnel needed to have vocabulary skills to choose words carefully and be specific, not ambiguous, as the latter tends to confuse the listener over the telephone.

The skill to pronounce words clearly is also important for the listener to be able to understand the message clearly. Equally important are stress and intonation. Tests

have shown that people generally comprehend and retain only one-fourth of what is said (Marks, 1994). Therefore, sales personnel must use sentences that are concise and precise since listeners often find it difficult to retain much of the message especially when it is a long one.

The study has revealed that sales personnel used the telephone for prospecting and contacting clients for the first time. In these situations, sales personnel needed to know how to make introductions. In addition to this, sometimes they needed to negotiate prices over the telephone and as such need to have negotiation skills. To negotiate with clients, they need to use persuasive words. In other words, they needed to have vocabulary skills and the right questioning techniques to get the client involved because increased involvement increases the potential of making a sale. Through proper questioning techniques and using appropriate words, the sales personnel can elicit information from clients and eventually reach a mutually satisfactory agreement without sounding offensive.

The sales personnel also needed speaking skills to enable them to speak effectively at meetings. It was found that for the sales personnel in the study, there were essentially two types of meetings - formal and informal. Every meeting varied in terms of components such as topic, purpose, participants, setting and rules for interaction. Therefore, what this means is that sales personnel need to have a repertoire of different skills that would enable them to participate and contribute effectively in different types of meetings.

One of the skills required, for example, was the ability to know when to speak or "turn-taking". This involved among other things, cultural factors such as allowing the more senior members or the superiors to speak first.

For informal meetings that require "socializing", the sales personnel need "social" English speaking skills. At this juncture perhaps "socializing" needs a little elaboration. This organization believes that successful salesmanship calls for great "socializing" skills that include the ability to mingle and communicate with people of all levels. "Socializing" often requires sales personnel to be engaged in "small talk" or "social talk" in contrast to the more serious "business talk" at formal meetings. "Small talk" is considered an important business ritual and is used to generate rapport between the sales personnel and their clients. Sales personnel who do not have "socializing" skills will be handicapped in the sense that their social networking will be rather restricted. This in turn will result in a smaller number of prospective clients and hence, fewer sales deal. Negotiating and conflict resolving skills were important as meetings often involved negotiations and conflicts.

It was found that speaking skills were also important to the sales personnel for effective product promotions, which involved communicative events such as sales presentations, product demonstrations, seminars and exhibitions. The sales personnel needed to have oral presentation skill to communicate their product knowledge to their clients in order to convince them to buy the products. As the clients' decision hinges on their understanding of the product as explained by the sales personnel, it is crucial for a sales personnel to have the skill to explain clearly. They also needed to have the skill to capture the prospect's attention, for instance by using key words or phrases. Equally important to the sales personnel in a product promotion was the

questioning skill - to establish a rapport with the prospective clients and get feedback from them so that they could identify the clients' needs.

Writing skills

According to the specialist informants, it was important for all business transactions to be documented because of the legal implications. As such, writing played an important part in the sales personnel's job. Unfortunately, some of the sales personnel in this organization did not keep to this practice of documenting their sales transactions although the Group Managing Director (GMD) wanted them to do so. The GMD felt that the sales personnel preferred to do business through the spoken channel because they did not have good writing skills. According to the specialist informants the ability to write letters was an important skill needed by sales personnel in dealing with clients, suppliers and principals. Because letters and faxes were meant for external communication, effective written communication skill was important for the sake of maintaining the professional image of the organization as well as achieving the purpose of communication.

Apart from this, all business transactions involved some kind of agreements, which have to be stated in "black and white" or writing. Since stipulating the terms and conditions of the business transactions was crucial to the company, good writing skill was necessary in order to avoid misunderstandings that could arise as a result of poor writing skills. An examination of the business correspondence written by the sales personnel confirmed that they lacked vocabulary, grammatical and organizational skills in their writing. There were instances of errors in concord, tenses, and coherence, to name a few.

The importance of good writing skill was also agreed upon by the Group Executive Director. To illustrate this, in the interview, he stated that effective writing skill was all the more important in the midst of an economic downturn when frequent disputes and disagreements arose. It was crucial for sales and purchase terms and conditions to be clearly and explicitly stated in writing. However, this is where the problem lies. An examination of the documents showed that the sales personnel often resorted to copying 'whole sentences' or 'stock' phrases for use in different letters even though these were not appropriate. For example, it was found that the phrase "your goodself" was repeatedly used although it was rather archaic and out of place in the context of the letters.

Communicative competence

On the whole, the sales personnel in this business organization needed to have communicative competence (see section on terms and definitions). During the observations, I found that the sales personnel were generally not aware of some of the communicative rules and norms that govern conventions in the discourse community. At times they failed to observe conversational rules or use language appropriately and as a result a misunderstanding or communication breakdown occurred. For example, in an informal interview, one of the informants pointed out that it was important for the sale personnel to know simple rules like addressing the principals from the United Kingdom (UK) correctly. He gave an example in which one of the sales personnel addressed the UK principal as "Mr. David" instead of "Mr. East", the latter being the

principal's surname and the former, his first name. Although such a mistake might appear as a minor one, it gave the UK principal a bad impression of his Malaysian business counterpart. In other words, it is important for sales personnel to have sociolinguistic competence so as to be aware of the cultural differences of people they come into contact with.

From the observations of the sales personnel and examination of the letters written by them, I found that they made frequent grammatical errors in their speech and writing. Therefore, I believe grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence would certainly enhance the efficiency of the sales personnel.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have discussed the speaking and writing needs of sales personnel in a Malaysian business context. The study has shown that to be successful in securing a sales order, sales personnel need to have different communication skills in English that will enable them to perform effectively in a variety of communicative events in the sale process.

In attempting to document the communicative needs of sales personnel, a distinctive feature of the study has been the use of ethnographic approach to needs analysis. This approach has enabled the researcher to gain valuable insights into the discourse community with regard to the types of communicative events that sales personnel are involved in and the communication skills that they need in order to perform effectively in their job. These insights have important pedagogical implications for ESP programs preparing students of tertiary institutions who intend to join the sales and marketing profession. The findings of this study could be exploited to help in the designing of syllabus, materials and tasks for Business English courses. Since virtually all business enterprises involve sales, the findings of this study could equally benefit ESP courses for any business organization that needs to improve the communicative skills of its sales personnel.

Although the implications stated here are based on the findings of sales personnel in this organization, they may also be seen generally relevant to situations in similar businesses in Malaysia. The Malaysian manufacturing and export-oriented economy needs sales personnel who can participate and compete effectively in the international markets. In view of the projected shortage of sales and marketing personnel in the export sector (The Star March 4, 1998) setting up such an ESP program in universities and other institutions of higher learning can help to meet the country's need for 'skilled' sales personnel.

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Biodata

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