CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Historically, prior to the innovation of the large-scale manufacture of goods, the majority of Malaysian workers were involved in primary or extractive industries. In the early 1960's manufacturing or secondary industry concerned with processing of raw materials emerged. This led to industrialisation. Mechanisation and automation of industrial processes began concomitantly with the flourishing of service industries like insurance, education, media, banking and health. With modernisation and accumulation of wealth, people were demanding for more sophisticated service facilities. This trend gave rise to the numerous private medical hospitals in Malaysia. On account of this, the dominant paradigm has switched from not only research in improving technology, mechanisation and automation but also the human factor. In a business community, especially in the service sector, the human factor is of utmost importance. Consequently, the result of all these changes is the need to have the ability to communicate well.

1.1. The Importance of Communication Skills in Service Oriented Organisations

It is estimated that in 1998 the service sector was the biggest employer providing an estimated 48% of the Gross Domestic Product as indicated in the Key Economic Indicators. (See Appendix A for Table of Key Economic Indicators 1997-1998). Since service providers spend most of their time dealing with people rather than things, a vital part of customer service is communication. Recent research on customer dissatisfaction highlights the point that people stop dealing with a particular business because they are
upset with the service they receive and that it is six times more expensive to acquire a new customer than it is to retain old ones. It can therefore be deduced that an organisation, which provides superior customer service can charge more, create greater profits and achieve greater market share because customers will generally pay more for superior customer service (Lovelock, 1994). Since almost half the labour force in Malaysia comprises workers in the service sector, there seems to be an urgent need to investigate the expected requirement of the workers (in terms of skills) in the service sector. It is quite crucial that these workers be able to communicate effectively to satisfy the customers. On-the job training expecting the workers’ communication skills to improve naturally might not be the best strategy especially where ‘quality’, ‘profit’ ‘customer satisfaction’ and ‘time’ are the important considerations. It is obvious that effective communicational skills will benefit not only the organisation but also enhance the ‘hirability’, ‘effectiveness’, ‘reputation’ and ‘promotability’ of the workers.

1.1.1. Mode of Communication in the Service Sector.

People communicate in many different ways. Communication in the service industry is most frequently accomplished through verbal languages, in most cases in English. With the advent of the information technology era, computer languages, however, are fast becoming the norm in communication. Nevertheless, in the service industry communication in both these mediums is noticeably the life channel. Communication is therefore one of the most important skills that needs to be mastered. Communication enables people in this complex world of business to work together, to exchange products and services, to share and achieve goals profitably. In this corporate world the profit motive is strong. Profit is earned through understanding and understanding requires
communication. In line with the profit target is the new watchword in today's business organisation: 'quality'. This involves doing the job right, making the customers happy and striving for 'zero defects'. Communicational competence is, therefore, one of the main prerequisites in helping to meet the challenges of today's global competition.

1.2. Definition of Communication

Prior to further discussion of the need to be able to communicate well, it is vital that the term communication is defined. People have been trying to define communication for more than 2000 years. The Greek philosopher Aristotle in his book *The Art of Rhetoric* divided communication into three elements: speaker, speech and audience. Current communication theory models call these three elements sender, message and receiver. The Oxford English Dictionary lists the Latin root of communicate as *communicare* which means 'to make common to many and share'. Based on this definition, we can say that when people communicate effectively, they express their ideas and feelings in a way that is understandable to each other. Therefore communication is the process of people sharing thoughts, ideas and feelings with each other in a mutually understandable way and mutual understanding, it is recognised, is largely socially determined. In order to make sense and be acceptable, one needs to tailor one's speech behaviour in accordance with the norms of behaviour forged and expected by the community within which one generates.
1.3. The Concept of Discourse and Discourse Community.

It is also important to corroborate that effective communication means that speech behaviour is modified in accordance with the norms of behaviour forged and expected by the community within which one generates. Gee (1990:143) sums this up in his concept of discourse. He explains that:

A discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role'.

This leads us to the concept of discourse community. It is important to define this concept because, according to Swales, (1990:24) people communicate in various ways, using various mediums. English language skills are always divided into the four basic skills of speaking, reading, listening and speaking. Some discourse communities do not require equal proficiency in all these four skills to be able to communicate. Therefore, the discoursal characteristics are developed and maintained according to the communicative needs determined by the goals of the discourse community concerned. Lastly, discourse communities are centrifugal (they tend to separate people into occupational or speciality-interest groups). Therefore a discourse community recruits its members by persuasion, training or relevant qualification (Swales 1990:24). Swales proposes six defining characteristics that will be necessary and sufficient for identifying a group of individuals as a discourse community:

i. A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.

ii. These goals may be formally inscribed in documents or they may be more tacit. These common goals allow other people to join these organisations.
A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members. The mechanisms (meetings, telecommunication, etc.) vary according to the community.

A discourse community uses its participatory mechanism primarily to provide information and feedback.

A discourse community utilises and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims. It has developed and continues to develop discoursal expectations.

In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis. Most commonly these communities develop community-specific abbreviation and acronyms or uses specific terminology.

A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise.

These characteristics aid in grouping a community into a viable discourse community. Moreover, the criteria stated above help to examine the communicative needs of the discourse community.

1.4. Significance of English

In the Malaysian context, English is still largely used as the lingua franca in many private organisations. Therefore, to be able to communicate efficiently and effectively the Malaysian workforce by large would still need to master communication skills in English. In order to equip the workforce with this necessary skill it is essential to begin with a study of the significance of the English Language. This can be accomplished by
giving a historical background of the English Language in Malaysia ensued by a discussion on the exigency for English.

1.4.1. History of the English Language in Malaysia

The role and status of the English Language has undergone significant changes since Malaysia achieved its independence. English has now assumed the secondary role of second language in schools, public universities and the public sector although it retains its importance in the private sector.

The changing role and status of the English Language are related to the stature of Bahasa Malaysia after independence. In the pre independence era, English was the medium of instruction in both the primary and secondary urban schools funded by the Christian missionaries. At tertiary level, English was also the language of instruction for all subjects. After independence, one of the priorities of the independent Government of Malaysia was to establish a national system of education, which restructured the system to provide national unity, developed a national language and redressed economic imbalance. The Razak Report of 1956 emphasised that a common syllabus was necessary to promote the development and unity of the nation. English was then replaced with Bahasa Malaysia (henceforth known as BM). In 1967, BM was recognised as the official language of Malaysia. With the introduction of the Education Bill of 1970, English became a second language and it was only taught as a subject in schools (Asmah 1979).

In 1970 Standard One pupils across the nation underwent the new English as a Second Language Programme where English was taught only as a subject. This policy has had a significant impact on English Language instruction in schools and tertiary institutions and also on the overall English Language proficiency of Malaysians in general (Khairi Izwan
Abdullah et al, 1993). The findings of the Cabinet Committee Report on the Implementation of the Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 1979) has, in fact, highlighted the importance of English in the development of manpower needs. The findings also established the role of English Language to serve the pragmatic needs of the nation (Khairi Izwan Abdullah et al, 1993). The English language syllabus was then revamped and replaced with the communicative syllabus, which was later revised and incorporated into the English language programme as part of the present Integrated Secondary School Curriculum. These revisions and adaptations of the English language syllabus were synonymous with the realisation that English is still vital for the development of this country.

Despite the decision to introduce Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction, the government has been committed to a policy of maintaining English as a strong second language. Asmah Haji Omar (1975: 157-165) reiterates that:

The choice of Malay for national identity was based on various factors: indigeneity, geo linguistic context and the function of intragroup communication that the language exercised. However, English has been deemed a necessity for the development of the country and her people and is a compulsory subject in all schools and universities.

English is still the ‘second most important language’ in Malaysia. Various government documents continue to stress the economic, international and political value of English. English is taught as a compulsory subject for the first eleven years of schooling (Standard 1 to Form 5).

All these developments in the English Language have not improved the proficiency level of Malaysians entering the workforce. One of the reasons accredited for this decline is the
motivational factor. A pass in English is not essential for the award of certificates for any government examination therefore the learners do not give English as a subject much attention. This is one of the causes of the decline in English proficiency, which is a matter for serious consideration especially among those entering the work force.

The most recent attempt to try and arrest the decline of English is the Malaysian University English Test. English has been introduced as a subject in all pre university courses to enable students to sit for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). It is hoped that this stringent requirement will help to maintain the high level of English proficiency needed by the Malaysian workforce. However, this is still only a hope. The reality still remains that Malaysians are in urgent need of improving their English language skill to meet the increasingly demanding needs for English in this rapidly growing Malaysian economy.

1.4.2. Exigency for English

Towards the late 1980’s, the decline in the proficiency of English became a matter of great concern among academicians, prospective employers and also the government. Many business organisations found that their employees did not possess sufficient communication skills to be able to interface with English speaking customers. The general agreement was that the workforce increasingly fed by the existing system of education lacked in certain skills and qualities necessary for today’s commercial environment which is global in nature, one of which is interpersonal or communication skills (Management for the Future, NST 20/7/97). Asmah Haji Omar (1975: 157-165) in her paper highlights that English is important for the workforce as a ‘tool’:
English is taught so as to enable a Malaysian to use it comfortably as a tool in the profession of his or her choice and that he or she is able to interact with sufficient facility with other people.

Moreover, in view of the national aspiration to attain the status of a fully developed nation by the year 2020 there is now an urgency in attempts to stop this decline. In his working paper entitled "Malaysia: The Way Forward" that he presented at the inaugural meeting of the Business Council on 28 February 1991, the Prime Minister outlined the government's intended plan, explained the concept of Vision 2020 and listed the nine challenges to be faced by the country before it can become fully developed. The Prime Minister stressed that the challenge is to establish a society that is fully competitive in a global market in order to attain the status of a fully developed nation. In his text he acknowledged that:

In our drive to move vigorously ahead nothing is more important than the development of human resources... it is clear that the most important resource of any nation must be the talents, skills, creativity and will of its people... Our people are our ultimate resource. Without a doubt, in the 1990s and beyond, Malaysia must give the fullest emphasis possible to the development of this ultimate resource.

He also emphasised that to effectuate this aspiration, the development of the human resources should:
aspire to the highest standards with regard to the skills of our people, to their devotion to know-how and knowledge upgrading and self improvement, to their language competence, to their work attitudes and discipline, to their managerial abilities, to their achievement motivation, their attitude towards excellence and to the fostering of the entrepreneurial spirit.

It is realised that in order to be able to compete globally by acquiring the know-how and knowledge, one of the most important aspects which they need to aspire to the highest standard is their language competence. Malaysians need to be proficient in English, which is the language of businesses and the language of the knowledge based economy. Otherwise it is difficult for Malaysians to pursue and attain our international aims and national agenda.

In the Malaysian context, a majority of the local and international businesses are still conducted in English. Language competency has now become an important issue for the attainment of the prescribed VISION. Malaysians are now being compelled to communicate effectively in their second language in the business sector. The majority of the present workforce comes from an educational system where the medium of instruction is BM. Many of them are at a disadvantage because of a lack of general proficiency in English. The focus now is to address this decline since there is evidence of a lack of general proficiency in English. There have been vital discussions on the issue of the proficiency in English (NST 19.8 1997) and it was agreed that in its effort to redress the declining standard of English the Ministry of Education will introduce English as a principal paper for entry into tertiary education.
At a recent management education seminar (NST 20.5 1997) the general consensus was that the present workforce including graduates lacked interpersonal skills and that they need to develop skills to think critically and analytically in order to be competitive both locally and globally. This supports the notion that the decline of English Language proficiency is critical at all levels of the education system.

To alleviate this problem among graduates the Prime Minister announced (NST, 28 December 1993) that the cabinet had decided that:

"We will allow the use of English where necessary especially in engineering and medical subjects. We cannot allow the efficiency and capability of our people to be lower than those in other countries…. Malaysia must give priority to this because we cannot allow our country to be left behind. Or else, we will not be competitive”.

The present economic downturn has also affected the number of students going overseas for higher education and professional training. In order to achieve the most advanced knowledge and training, more and more students are forced to enter local tertiary institutions and colleges. This has given rise to collaboration with foreign universities and colleges to set up twinning programmes or 3+0 programmes where students can attain foreign degrees and diplomas without having to go overseas. The medium of instruction of these programmes is English. There is also a corresponding influx of foreign instructors who come to Malaysia to implement and maintain the standard requirement of the particular board or university. This and the necessity to further emphasise the need to promote Malaysia as a destination of excellent education require that English is maintained as the other medium of instruction for pragmatic reasons so that the learners can benefit from these foreign teaching programmes.
It is felt that the nation’s objective for the education system under Vision 2020 should be to create future generations of Malaysians for the 21st century who will be not only professionally and culturally proficient in the national language (Bahasa Malaysia) but also have a good command of the global language of science, commerce, communication and cultural literacy, that is English. In line with this, there has been a call for greater participation of the private sector to assist in realising this VISION.

1.5. Purpose of the Study

It has been established that there is a decline in the standard of English at all levels of education. It has also been established that different domains of activity, different professions, different industries etc. have different configuration of English use. Therefore there is a big gap between the language studied in schools and the language skills required at the workplace. It is important that this situation is bridged. This study focuses on the language skills required by a section of the service industry, viz. the health sector.

A broad overview of the service industry in this country reveals that English is the lingua franca be it in the hospitality industries, banks or private hospitals. The private hospitals compared to the government hospitals largely use English Language for the purpose of communication. The reasons for this phenomenon that the researcher could establish are:

i. these hospitals cater for a bigger percentage of patients from the upper middle class who normally speak in English.
ii. the hospitals cater for large corporate clients both local and foreign organisations.
iii. the hospitals cater for a lot of foreigners who speak English.
iv. in this particular hospital where this research was conducted, the hospital had adopted an American management style from its inception since it had an American management team to help run the hospital in the beginning. The hospital continued the precedence in management style when the hospital was taken over by its local management team.

v. a large percentage of the correspondence except for governmental correspondence is in English.

These reasons establish the need for the staff to be proficient in English. This study will concentrate on only the entry-level workers, specifically the front liners.

The purpose of the study therefore is to identify the communication needs of the frontline staff (for example: receptionists, concierges, office assistants, clinical assistants and cashiers) in a private hospital in the Klang Valley with a view to making recommendations for course design for teaching the said people the English that they need in their workplace. To enable the researcher to make recommendations for a course design for this particular group a needs analysis has to be done first. It would answer questions on the learners’ requirements for specific skills and content.

The researcher aims to pay particular attention to these questions:

**Research Questions**

1. How important is English for these front line staff? If it is important, how viable is it to offer specialised training in communicational skills in English to this group of front line staff?
2. In designing an English Language course for front line staff at a private hospital,
   (i) what language skills are considered most important?
   (ii) what sub-skills will be required to enhance their efficiency?

3. What do the front line staff need these language skills for? Are the skills for
   occupational purposes only or are there any other purposes for learning these skills?

4. Would computerisation limit the skill or lessen the need to learn any of these skills?

1.6. Research Site

This study was conducted at a well-known medical centre in the Klang Valley,
henceforth known as the Medical Centre (MC). MC is a wholly owned subsidiary of one
of Malaysia’s largest multinational conglomerates.

An overview of the hospital shows that the hospital is involved primarily in providing
state-of-the-art medical services and also other related community health projects, which
require well-trained staff who are well-versed in communicative skills. MC is a privately
owned medical centre serving the primary and subspecialty health care needs of the
Klang Valley area. Additionally MC serves as a regional referral centre in selected
subspecialty medical disciplines like Liver Transplant Surgery and infertility.

The hospital was first opened in July 1985 and has experienced continuous growth in its
patient volume as well as its services. The hospital has a staff strength of 1200 who see
over 1000 – 1500 outpatients a day. It also has a daily in-patient census of 200-270
patients. The hospital’s facilities include 80 Outpatient Specialist Suites where the
specialists conduct their clinics with the assistance of trained personnel. It handles a
multiplicity of surgical procedures. Its surgical services also include Malaysia’s first purpose built hospital- based day surgery care. It has a 24-hour emergency service and a pharmacy, which is also open 24 hours a day.

The hospital is committed to a Community Partnership Programme which provides patients and members of the public with opportunities to learn about advances in medicine and management of ailments through seminars. The Community Partnership Programme also includes CPR training, parentcraft classes and breast feeding counselling. In 1994, MC opened its Health Care Information Library, which is aimed at providing patients with literature on causes of prevalent diseases and their prevention. The hospital also provides other services like the concierge services, customer support services and a community relation department in addition to a speakers’ bureau.

It provides medical care services with a mission “WE CARE, WE SERVE”. This is a culture that has been nurtured since MC’s inception in 1985. Since their commitment to provide care and service in everything they do is built into the way they deliver services, from admission process right through to discharge services, it is essential that they should be able to communicate efficiently. The medical centre has also been accredited with the ISO 9002 status. This standard requires that all activities be documented which necessitates that their staff are also trained to be able to document efficiently.

This hospital is governed by its vision and values as stated in its Mission Statement and its Quality Policy.
1.6.1. The Hospital’s VISION

In order to provide the excellent service demanded by the customers, the hospital is governed by their VISION which is to be the premier patient care centre in the ASEAN region with the best clinical and business practices.

Their aims are to observe the following objectives and principles:

❖ Fulfil patient’s need with a spirit of genuine care and concern for their welfare.
❖ Follow the highest ethical principles.
❖ Provide superior facilities, equipment, and operational systems.
❖ Maintain a constant commitment to staff’s welfare and development.
❖ Maintain an environment of mutual commitment, care and harmony of purpose.
❖ Strive for excellence; constant improvement of everything they do.

1.6.2. The Hospital’s Quality Policy

In line with the hospital’s VISION the hospital’s policy is to provide the highest achievable quality of goods and services to their customers in the most cost-effective way possible. They hope to achieve this goal through:

adherence to their core values contained in their mission statement,
the constant monitoring of customer feedback and operational systems
staff development and training in the tools of quality enhancement.

[Source MC’s Related Documents]

This study will take into account that the MC in its Mission Statement and Quality Policy is committed to the staff’s welfare, development and training. The large multiple facilities
provided by the hospital would demand that it has a very efficient and effective network of communication to be able to operate effectively as a whole. Since the departments are interdependent, organisational communication is likely to be multidirectional. It is obvious that being a service industry effective communication is of utmost importance to the hospital's achievement of all the objectives stated above and in the efficient running of the various medical projects the hospital has taken on. The need to constantly improve everything they do will make it necessary to train their staff in communicative competence.

Figure 1 overleaf shows the organisational structure of MC. The hospital is run by a team of staff headed by the Director of Medical Centre. To facilitate this study the researcher will examine the three main sectors providing the various services rendered by the hospital namely, the corporate services, the nursing and support services and the ancillary services.
Figure 1.1: The Organisational Chart of MC
1.7 Significance of the Study

It is evident that there is a greater need for communication in English in the private sector, particularly in the service sector. It is hoped that the findings of the study will show that it is especially important that front line staff of service oriented organisations communicate efficiently and effectively in English more than in the other languages. One of the reasons is that for most of the customers the introduction to an organisation is through its front line personnel – the people at the counters or on the telephones. Customers’ first judgement of the entire organisation is formed by the impression they form during these meetings with the front line personnel. Since the position of these frontliners is crucial to an organisation, these personnel should also be equipped with knowledge about the rest of the organisation and their role within it. This means that there is a great need for training in not only technical know-how but also communicational skills for front line staff of any service-oriented organisation.

It has been established that unlike other people in their organisation who work behind the scenes, front line personnel are continually in the public eye and thus they should be able to respond to any situation in the most appropriate way. Therefore these service providers should be very well equipped with the art of communicating. Since most of the front line personnel come from an educational system where the medium of instruction is BM, many of them are at a disadvantage because of a lack of general proficiency in English. Even though they have had eleven years of exposure to English upon entry into the workforce, their English proficiency level is not sufficient to cope with their job requirement. Many of them do not have any other professional qualification and very little previous experience or training. The researcher hopes that this study will establish
that there is a need for service-oriented organisations to provide specified training to enhance the communicative competence of their front line staff. It is hoped that this study will also provide opportunities for the frontline staff to get training tailored to their needs, which in turn can enhance their ‘efficiency’, ‘effectiveness’ and also ‘promotability’. It is hoped that with this knowledge a specialised course can be designed which will benefit both the front line staff and the organisations where these staff members are employed.

In Malaysia, the Human Resource Department Fund is a boon to companies to either send their staff for training or to provide in-house training. This fund should give incentives to companies to send their staff for training, especially to improve their communicative competence. The findings of this study should be able to provide an insight to trainers, not necessarily language teachers, to the communicative needs of front line staff. In macro terms therefore, this study has relevance in terms of curriculum and syllabus design to pave the way for organisations to utilise the fund in a more effective and profitable way.

As this study takes on a needs analysis approach that focuses on the communicative events within the work setting of this discourse community, the researcher is confident that the findings will be relevant to and representative of the needs of similar discourse communities. As the research site is a state-of-the-art hospital, the findings of this research are likely to give a balanced and probably generalisable insights into the communicative needs of front line staff not just of this hospital but of the several similar hospitals in operation in the country now as well as of the future.