

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 OVERVIEW

Communication is an essential skill in the sense that it is one of the key factors which determines the success or failure of an individual or an organization in today's innovative and technologically competitive business world. Cronkhite in Burgoon (1994:14) says that,

“Communication is symbolic behaviour that occurs between two or more participating individuals. It has the characteristics of being a process, it is transactional in nature and it is effective. It is a positive, goal-directed behaviour that can have instrumental or consummatory ends.”

Language, one of the most important aspects of communication, is used as a tool to interact and convey the intended messages to achieve the goals and objectives of individuals and organizations.

The role of English as the language of the new millennium cannot be disputed, as it is the lingua franca of the world of new information and technology. Thus, the rapid economic growth, social changes and the technological advancement and challenges currently

taking place in Malaysia as the country moves towards globalization emphasizes the importance of English as the language of communication in business

This study attempts to investigate the English language use of a workforce responsible for maintaining safety in a construction site. An ethnographic approach is adopted in order to get a 'thick description' (Geerts 1983) of the communicative needs of the workforce in the organization. The verbal and non-verbal communication of the Safety Team with whom during the course of their daily tasks was observed, analyzed and described in order to understand the use of the English language in a typical construction site. The Safety Management Team has frequent discussions, talks and briefings with the entire workforce and site staff to create safety awareness and update the physical site changes and progress.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.2.1 DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA

The construction industry plays an instrumental role in a country's development, regardless of the stage of development at which the country is. It acts as a catalyst to spur the growth of other sectors in the nation's economy as the fate of large, medium and small-scale industries which deal with steel, timber, cement, bricks and other construction related materials depend on the construction industry for continued growth. Therefore, the industry has often been referred to as the 'engine of growth', 'stimulator of economic performance' and 'the barometer of economic performance, to mention a few terms' (Seminar on Safety In Construction - May 1996 - Board Of Engineers Malaysia).

Malaysia, like many of its counterparts in the East Asian region, has experienced tremendous growth, registering an average of 8% since 1987. The region is tipped to be the fastest growing in the Asian Region in this new millennium (CIDB-Journal, February 2000). In tandem with the buoyant national economy, the construction sector also experienced a tremendous growth of 8% in 1980 to 15.2% in 1995. However, the Asian economic crisis in late 1997 forced the construction industry to decline by 8%. In the years 1998 and 1999, it further shrunk to 4.1%, thus affecting all the associated industries as well. The government initiated many reforms to revive the construction industry such as giving priority to low and middle cost housing projects. The government also concentrated on improving the infrastructure nationwide by constructing new highways, bridges and drainage systems. At present (2002) the construction industry has grown to about 7.8%, contributing 4.1% to the GDP of the country (Conference on Occupational, Safety and Health - COSH - 2000). This growth is expected to continue in the forthcoming years as the nation embarks on its 8th Malaysia Plan. (Seminar on Safety In Construction - Board Of Engineer Malaysia - May 1996.)

According to the guidelines set by the government, the construction industry is expected to play its part in the social and community development of the country. As such, the relationship between the industry and the community it serves must not be purely commercial but also to bring about social and economic development. Construction activities bring about changes to our landscapes and cityscapes, our environment, our community relationships and our daily lives, thus they must be designed to provide a more conducive and healthy environment.

The Malaysian government has set up the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) under Act 520: 1994 so as to co-ordinate and bring in effective leadership

among the construction industry players. Its function is to consolidate the growth of the construction industry and to eventually steer it into the international market.

1.2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

The English language is the main access for sophisticated information technology in this new millennium. Much of the information available worldwide is in English. Thus, Malaysia, with her vision of being an industrialized nation by 2020 must also have adequate access to information technologies in order to be competitive.

The construction industry in Malaysia has always used high technology and innovative methods to develop and achieve international standards of architecture. Therefore, the English language is important as a means to gain information in order to be competitive in the construction industry. The work force of this industry needs to use the English language as a communication tool to achieve its intended purposes and goals.

In addition, the construction industry in Malaysia consists largely of foreign workers as the skilled labour force is mainly made up of Indonesians, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis. At the managerial and supervisory level, the labour force is largely Malaysian. In many construction projects the top management staff are usually expatriate professionals from countries such as America, Australia, Britain, Canada, Jordan, Turkey and India. (Seminar on Safety In Construction - Board Of Engineers Malaysia - May 1996). The presence of multi-nationals in the construction industry requires an international or world language for interaction. Thus, English, as a world language, has

become the logical choice of language used in communication in the construction industry.

1.2.3 THE RATIONALE FOR CHOOSING THE SAFETY MANAGEMENT SECTOR AND SAFETY TEAM

Despite the tremendous growth of the construction sector, the incidences of building failure during and after construction, fatal accidents on construction sites, slope failures, silted up rivers and drains, environmental degradation, flash floods and other 'accidents' have brought the construction industry under criticism for its lack of quality practices and standards. Calls have been made for the industry to be more accountable and responsible.

In 1994, the Malaysian Government implemented the Occupational Safety and Health Act 514 (OSHA)(1994) and established the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH)(1994) to reduce the number of accidents in the construction industry, thus showing its serious commitment in ensuring and improving safety practices at any work place. According to the Board of Engineers of Malaysia, Seminar on Safety In Construction May 1996, the poor safety records of the construction sector can be attributed to many causes, some of which are:

1. the lack of understanding about the importance of good safety practices.
2. the putting of profits before safety.
3. the poor communication between on-site personnel.
4. the lack of safety training.

5. the lack of documentation on safety procedures and practices on site.
6. the lack of personnel designated to handle safety issues on site.

(Seminar on Safety In Construction - Board Of Engineers Malaysia - May 1996).

As a result of this state of affairs, the CIDB launched 'zero-accident' programs and campaigns using its regulatory role to ensure better safety standards in the industry.

In view of the importance of 'safety' in the construction site, the Safety Management Team will be a suitable 'discourse community' for investigation. This particular group of people is responsible for maintaining the safety of the entire site, and the issue of safety is not confined to one section or locality. The constantly changing environment and landscape at the construction site requires constant and effective action by the safety team to safeguard all the safety aspects at the jobsite. Even the simplest mistake in communication among the safety team can result in a great disaster. Therefore, the entire safety team has to be very conscious of and cautious in their 'communicative skills' and their 'communicative strategies' while interacting with other construction crew. This group of workers is the forefront personnel at the jobsite due to the nature of their job. The safety crew is found to be more interactive with all levels of personnel involved in the construction industry compared to the production crew. Very often they seek the guidance and advice of their superiors to keep abreast with the changing environment. Therefore, the researcher feels that the scenario at the construction site provides an interesting platform to study the use of the English language in the communicative strategies of the Safety Management Team.

1.2.4 PUTRA JAYA AS THE RESEARCH SITE

The research was conducted at a Project Site in Putra Jaya, the Federal Administrative Capital of Selangor, which is situated approximately 25 kilometres south of Kuala Lumpur. Putra Jaya was chosen as it is in the core development precinct in the country at this point of time. The project aims to transform the former Prang Besar and Sedgley Estate into a modern, well-integrated and self-contained city over a period of 10 years. The actual site of investigation of this study is at the Common Utility Tunnel (CUT) Project. (Refer to Appendix D)

The utility tunnel serves as the main feeder for the various utilities required for the entire future development of Putra Jaya. The construction of a utility tunnel, the first of its kind, has been undertaken by Gadang Engineering (M) Sdn. Bhd. (The Gadang Engineering (M) Sdn. Bhd and the concept of CUT will be described further in Chapter 4). The job involves deep trench excavation, reinforcement concrete placing and facility installation such as water, electricity, telecommunications and gas piping.

Putra Jaya currently has many completed and on going projects at various stages of construction involving thousands of local and foreign workers especially Indonesians and Bangladeshis. The majority of these foreign workers are labourers. However, there are also expatriate professionals such as engineers, quantity surveyors and architects. These professionals are from Pakistan, India, Iran, Lebanon and Britain. These expatriate professionals are usually members of the board of directors in the construction industry.

The foreign workers at the project site of the tunnel are mainly Indonesians and Bangladeshis. These people communicate mainly in English and Bahasa Malaysia .

However their vernacular language is widely used when they communicate among the people in their own communities.

The English language plays a prominent and pivotal role in the execution of the day-to-day operations at the construction site. Since a large number of foreign workers are at the forefront of handling construction activities, messages have to be clearly transmitted to the craftsmen and labourers in the simplest form by using illustrations and simplified language in order to carry out the tasks required. In many instances, a combination of Bahasa Malaysia and English is also widely used.

1.2.5 GADANG HOLDINGS BERHAD

Gadang Holdings Berhad is a public listed company on the Second Board of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (KLSE). Since its inception in 1987 and its public listing on 2nd September 1994, Gadang, through its Group of Companies, has built up a diversified portfolio of business in the construction industry and has emerged as a reputable contractor.

Gadang Group's principal activities are building and civil engineering construction. Over two decades, the group has successfully undertaken numerous projects from both the government and private sectors. These include bulk earthworks, infrastructure works, and piling and foundation works at Putrajaya and the BPC Arcylics Complex in Kuantan. The group has also ventured into property development.

With its wealth of construction experience, and comprehensive range of services and experts, Gadang Group is a formidable and competitive contractor in Malaysia,

delivering quality and reliable services to a broad-based clientele especially on design and building projects. Its wholly owned subsidiary, Gadang Engineering (M) Sdn. Bhd. is a PKK [Perkidmatan Kontraktor Kerja] registered Class 'A' Contractor as well as a CIDB [Construction Industry Development Board] registered Grade G Contractor.

1.2.6 COMMON UTILITY TRENCH (CUT) AT PUTRAJAYA

The researcher had the opportunity to conduct the study at one of the group's major projects at Putrajaya, namely The Common Utility Trench (C.U.T). The tunnel works begin with a deep trench excavation, followed by the formation of concrete structure comprising a wide base and two vertical walls. It is completed with a top slab (capping). All utilities are housed inside the structure measuring approximately 10m x 8 m x 8m. (Refer to diagram in Appendix D). The completed structure is then covered with earth (back filling) to the original ground level. The completed section is hidden below the ground. Eventually it will be a closed top reinforced service tunnel at the central portion of Putrajaya, with branches to other essential areas.

To construct the structure, the tasks involved substantial earthwork (cutting and filling) reinforcement, framework and concreting. The common utility tunnel will provide a protected environment for the utilities against potential damage in future.

The electrical cables are placed on trays while the gas pipeline is housed in a separate channel. The relevant utilities are laid at both open ends or through temporary openings in the top slab. Certain sections of the structure are compartmentalized for

effective operational purposes. The tunnel is operated in segments of 500 metres in length.

The entire project is expected to be completed in 24 months. The cost involved is approximately RM47 million.

1.2.7 THE PRIMARY OBJECTIVES OF THE SAFETY MANAGEMENT TEAM AND ITS OVERALL COMMUNICATION LINES

The main objective of the Safety Management team is to create a safe and risk free working environment. Thus, the prime concern is be to complete the project without any accidents. In order to achieve a 'zero accident' jobsite, the on-site Safety Management Team has to relentlessly provide and maintain a safe system of work. Their main function is to identify, evaluate and control all risks at the jobsite. Dealing largely with foreign workers, the Safety Management Team's task is an extremely difficult and challenging one.

As such, various simple and effective strategies are put in place to develop and foster a good relationship amongst the workforce. The Safety Management Team takes every reasonable step and approach to correct all unsafe acts and conditions by having daily inspections.

At this particular project site, the Safety Management Team has opted to educate and train its workforce in dealing with the job-hazards and risks present around them. The Safety Management Team conducts daily briefings and demonstrations to forewarn everyone about the impending dangers. It is also the duty of the Safety Management

Team to observe any physical changes to the environment that may pose a danger to health and safety such as water ponds at the construction site which are ideal breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Warnings and signage are placed at suitable locations in order to control the situation. The Safety Management Team also ensures that the plants, machinery and equipment on the jobsite are in good condition.

Generally, the Safety Management Team is the policing force at the jobsite and it has a great responsibility to safeguard everyone concerned. A relatively safe jobsite would ensure a better day-to-day production, thus increasing the profitability of their organization. It also serves as an indicator of achievement.

The Safety Management Team clearly emphasises that job safety is an asset and not a liability. Therefore, each and everyone engaged at this jobsite should co-operate and adhere to all safety rules and regulations.

The overall communication of the Safety Management Team is divided into two main categories: internal and external (Refer to Figure 9 – Page 78). The internal communication involves receiving instructions and directives from the top management, the client, the Project Management Team and the consultants which are then periodically implemented on site through the Safety Officers, Supervisors and the respective crew in compliance with the safety standards set upon each project site.

The external communication basically involve dealings with the authorities, especially the Department of Safety and Health (DOSH), police and the local council. The Safety Manager maintains a good rapport and closely liaises with them to obtain the various permits and licenses in accordance to existing rules and regulations. The Safety

Manager also deals with the suppliers to ensure that proper services, equipment and machinery such as gas, telephone and electricity are delivered, fixed and commissioned on time. (A detailed description of communication activities and communication patterns of the internal and external level is discussed in Section 4.5)

1.2.8 EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND OF THE SAFETY

MANAGEMENT TEAM

The educational background of the Safety Management Team is an important factor when we discuss the communicative patterns and strategies used at the construction site. The competency of the team in using the English language also governs the patterns and the strategies of communication. (This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four). Table 1 at page 14 shows the educational back ground of the Safety Management Team. It illustrates the level, the position, the qualifications of other and the advantages of other relevant experience in their respective fields.

The Project Manager is a foreign university graduate in Structural Engineering. The Safety Manager is a local university graduate in Building Engineering. Both of them are with several years experience in their respective fields. The engineers are also graduates in Structural, Electrical, Civil, Earth or Building Engineering from local or foreign universities. Two of them have a few years working experience and three of them are fresh graduates.

The middle level workers are the safety officers and the supervisory staff. The safety officers are diploma or certificate holders in Building, Mechanical or Electrical

Engineering from local public or private colleges. The supervisory staff are certificate holders of secondary schools. Basically, the bottom level workers are those with lesser formal education. Many of them, including the Indonesian and the Bangladeshi works, have only six years of formal primary education or lesser than that. Therefore, their competency in using the English language is limited.

The selection of these workers is based on skill-testing especially when they demand a high salary. For example, a carpenter is tested on his ability to saw a piece of timber according to the measurements.

According to the Safety Manager, the educational background of the Safety Management Team is confidential. Therefore, the Safety Manager declined the request for the evidence of the educational background of the team. However, he explained in detail the educational background of the Safety Management Team to the researcher.

Table 1 :

The Educational Background of The Safety Management Team

Level	Position	Qualifications	Other Relevant Qualifications
Top	Project Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 years of formal education. Degree holder in Structural Engineering- foreign university. 	Fieldwork experience is a must.
	Safety Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 years of formal education. Degree holder in Builing Engineering. 	Fieldwork experience is a must.
	Engineers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 years of formal education. Degree holder in Structural, Mechanical, Electrical,Civil, Earth or Building Engineering- local universities. 	Fieldwork is not a requirement but an advantage.
	Safety Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 years of formal education. Diploma holder in Mechanical , Electrical, or Building Engineering - local public or private universities or colleges. 	Fieldwork experience is a must.
Medium	Supervisory Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 years formal education. Certificate holders of upper secondary school. 	Fieldwork experience preferred but not a requirement. Training will be provided periodically.
	Craftsmen Labourers Security Crew	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6 years of formal education or lesser than that. 	Skilled workers and craftsmen - working experience is a must. Labours and security crew - working experience is not a requirement. Training will be provided if necessary.
Bottom			

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This research is concerned mainly with investigating the communicative skills used by a small occupational safety group in the construction industry, namely the Safety Management Team (SMT). The central issue under investigation is the use of the English language, and the English language needs of the various members of the team.

1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The objectives of the research are to observe and analyze the patterns of communication and the communicative skills of the workforce. The study focuses on various strategies used by the Safety Management Team in the achievement of their communicative intent.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the communicative activities in which the Safety Management Staff participate at the construction base?
2. What are the patterns of oral communication and communicative strategies observable in the methods of communication used in the above activities, especially with regards to the English language?

3. What are the possible reasons for these patterns of communication and communicative strategies?
4. What are the implications of these patterns of communication and communicative strategies?

1.6 SCOPE OF RESEARCH

The primary concern of this research is the verbal communication in the English language and also the various communicative strategies employed by the Safety Management Team in their daily course of activities and in the achievement of their shared goals by and among the team.

A substantial portion of the communication is in the spoken form although written illustrations and sign language are frequently used. The aim of the research is to focus on the form, function and the specific communicative strategies used by the workforce rather than on their linguistic inaccuracies in the language.

The occurrence of code switching and code mixing which are familiar and interesting at the construction scenario will be analyzed to determine how the workers use these approaches to make communication more effective at the jobsite.

1.7 DESCRIPTION OF METHODOLOGY

An ethnographic approach was used to collect the data, and ‘non-participant’ observation was the main method of data collecting. Apart from this, informal interviews were held to understand the communicative skills and strategies used by the participants in the organization. In addition to this, audio recording, note taking and photographic evidence were used as another form of input. This is dealt with in more detail in Chapter Three.

1.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Being a lady researcher and a first timer at a large construction site, there were many constraints faced. First of all, the physical inability to endure some unsafe changing site conditions posed some degree of restriction on the researcher’s movements. Further, owing to the tunnel’s design and engineering aspects, the risk exposure to accidents was also relatively high. In addition, the presence of various hazards such as the movements of machinery and inclement weather conditions further compounded the situation, restricting access and egress to the construction area, for example, the process of ascending and descending on temporary structures and ladders. Finally, high-risk activities such as rock blasting also prohibited the entry of the researcher into the working zone.

The researcher was not allowed to participate in top management/client meetings due to fear of revealing commercial decisions. It is also a policy matter of the organization not to allow third parties to be present in these meetings.

Despite the constraints, the researcher was not in any way, impeded in her observations. This was because the Safety Manager and his staff have extended their full co-operation and support in assisting the researcher in her work. Further, the researcher faced difficulty in accessing the personality and the attributes of the workforce because there were insufficient time to create the rapport with them in order to identify the cultural traits.

1.9 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study underlines the difficulties encountered by the Safety Management Team translating and transforming their intentions to establish good safety practices effectively.

The research also serves to demonstrate the variability of the language used. It provides an insight into the intricacies of language use with its ramifications and the implications on the overall working environment of the construction industry. Lastly the results also provide information on construction techniques and activities of the Safety Management Team in a construction site.

1.10 THE ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS

There are five chapters in this thesis. Chapter One highlights the development of the construction industry and the functions of the English Language as a communication tool in this Industry. A brief description of methodology and the significance of the study are also included in this chapter.

Chapter Two is the literature review for this research. Relevant theories and models of communication are viewed in relation to this study. A description of the ethnographic approach is also included.

Chapter Three describes the methodology adopted by the researcher in conducting this research. Chapter Four is the analysis of data collection and the reasons for the selected communication patterns and language strategies used at the construction site. Chapter Five gives a clear account of the research findings and proposed steps to indicate the kind of language needs, especially ESP, in the construction industry.