

THE RELATIONSHIP OF ENGLISH ABILITY AND CAREER MOBILITY

Bejo Sutrisno

Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing – IEC Jakarta

Email: bejo@stibaiec-jakarta.ac.id

Handayani

Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing – IEC Jakarta

Email: yani_johan@yahoo.com

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Abstract: The aims of this study are to find out how the individual's own language competences affect career mobility and to find out how the common language acts as a facilitator for career mobility. The qualitative research method is used in this study. Interviews with personnel from the case organization, provide the opportunity to observe the views and experiences of the interviewees and to find out how they fit in to the prior research done on this subject. The empirical research on the common corporate language strategy as facilitator or barrier for career mobility implicated that the choice of English as common corporate language was generally seen as a facilitator for career mobility and as the facilitators' positive effect on career mobility also influenced the employee's subjective as well the objective measures of career success.

Keywords: *English ability, career mobility, career success*

INTRODUCTION

Jenkins (2003) stated that the position of English language, in the field of entertainment, business or science, is undeniably dominant. English as an international language with speakers all over the world. In fact, the number of second and foreign language speakers of English has exceeded the native speakers and English has gained a lingua franca status in different fields. It is being recognized as one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Earlier, people used to get a job if they possessed expertise in their respective fields but in the current era, the specific skills should be complemented with communication skills. The need for giving emphasis on the English communication development is of utmost importance in the present scenario with an

objective to make the job aspirants gainfully employed.

According to Mehta (2012) In the last few years, as the jobs becoming global, the importance of English has increased manifold. It has over the years become an important medium of communication, both at the international and intra-national levels. The importance of spoken English is even more, because there are many cases where one knows his/her subject well, but fails to communicate it properly. The practice of spoken English, therefore, is quite essential. Learning English in a country where it is not a native language opens a number of opportunities for the individual. In today's corporate world, the need for effective communication has been

recognized and accepted more than technical knowledge.

English is being the most commonly used language in the corporate world; the knowledge of English is one of the most important employability skills. Knowledge of English is much sought after in the corporate world. Proper English does not mean only the ability to make grammatically correct sentences. It means other related skills for effective communication like presentation skills, convincing and negotiation skills and interpersonal skills using that language.

Based on Raman and Sharma's opinion (2012) that the Effective communication skills include oral skills for public speaking, presentations, negotiating, conflict resolutions, knowledge-sharing; Writing Skills for preparing reports, proposals, instruction manuals, writing memos, notices and official correspondence. It also includes a combination of verbal and non-verbal skills marked with proper and distinct articulation, appropriate pause, and voice modulation. If the medium of communication is English, certain amount of proficiency is needed in it. As English for us is a second language and not our mother tongue, a constant practice and study are absolutely needed.

Meanwhile according to Arthur and Rousseau (2000) that organizations cannot offer lifelong careers anymore and career paths have altered from traditional linear career progression towards more horizontal movements. Individuals need to adapt to the changes in their working environment, regardless of their willingness to do so.

Also, Jones (2005) added that the attitudes of individuals towards the employer and their views about their careers and employment have changed, and are changing, dramatically, thus challenging the traditional assumption commitment and motivation.

The changing nature of careers in today's business world inspired the writer to think about factors affecting career mobility that

leads to career success. Having started her career ten years ago in one of the international organizations in Jakarta, makes her believe that she could find out interesting results from the study of the relationship between English and career mobility.

The writer's current position is the third position she has so far during her service in one of the international organizations in Jakarta. She has had certain level of English competency tests to get to each position. Based on her experiences, the writer believes that English competency is one of the most important things that affects her career mobility. In the international organization she works for, some of her colleagues who have already equipped with knowledge, skills, good attitude and other positive attributes but have no improvement in their English ability. Competency stayed in certain position for a long time. On the other hand, her colleagues who have good English competency and communication skills, along with the requested knowledge, skills and experiences, have changed their positions/ got promoted several times.

The other reasons why the writer is interested to discuss about English that affecting career mobility/success because she recently appointed to be one of the TEC (Technical Evaluation Committee) members to recruit one Operations Manager in her section. A certain level of English competency is needed for this position. Four out of nine selected candidates were chosen to get the interview opportunity based on their English competencies and communication skills. Most of the selected candidates have experiences, knowledge, skills, and educational backgrounds more than what the organization are expected for this position, but their English ability has a very important role in the selection criteria that brought them to the next level of recruitment process.

Having this invaluable experience, to be the member of recruitment team has given wider

perspective to the writer of how important it is to learn/ master English for career mobility. Therefore, the writer was eager to see if the study would show similar results compared to her personal experience as well as if her perception of language management in the international organization would be shared by the interviewees.

This study aims to take a critical look at the effect of language practices on careers in an international organization environment through the study. In addition, the research will be looking at language effects on individual career mobility by individual interviews. The research objectives of this research are (1) to find out how the individual's own language competences affect career mobility and (2) to find out how the common language acts as a facilitator for career mobility.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Language strategies and practices in an organization

Janssens, Lambert and Steyaert (2004) define the language strategy as something that can refer to several components like a decision of which language(s) can be used, the role of translators in creating multilingual texts, the method used to validate the translation process or the types of texts that are expected to be produced. Moreover, the writer will also look at HR processes and the role of language in recruitment, training and development activities in the case organization.

Based on previous researches, language strategy or practices affect for example networking, communication and knowledge sharing. All of the presented language strategies and practices: common corporate language; lingua and multilingualism, include elements that can be perceived as a barrier or a facilitator for individual career development.

1. Common corporate language

The common corporate language is often supplemented with so called 'company speak',

in other words with particular abbreviations and expressions reflecting the culture of the company in question and its way of operating (Welch & Piekkari:2005). Feely and Hazing (2003) also stated that the common nowadays that multinational company/ organization makes a choice of an official corporate language in order to ease communication within and outside the company/ organization. A main reason for a common corporate language is to make information flow efficient within the company/organization in for example formal reporting, information systems and cross-national interaction. Employees thus know that in common communication one official language can be used as a rule.

Today, English is the most universally accepted language for international business and provides a baseline that puts everyone on the same page. Information and knowledge sharing are two aspects speaking in favor of common corporate language; it levels the playing field in terms of others than native English speakers, so that everyone is speaking another language than their mother tongue.

2. Lingua Franca

Today, people from all over the world use English or a variety of English to communicate. According to Crystal (2003) There are 320-380 million people who speak English as a first language, 300-500 million people who speak English as a second language, and nearly one billion people who speak English as a foreign language, or as a lingua franca.

Varra (2005) stated that during the course of recent years, the English language has secured a position as the lingua franca of the business world. The English language has in fact such a strong position in multinational companies that it can be adopted as common language in a company where no one actually speaks English as his or her mother tongue, or without the official policy that English would be the official language.

3. Multilingualism

It can be vital for the organization to also take into account local languages as that can have a major impact on relations with local stakeholders and customers (Born:2010). Furthermore, in the recruitment of competent local personnel, limiting oneself to just one language might have an effect on the quality of recruits. Feely and Hazing also state that functional multilingualism is relying on a mix of language and whatever means one can think of to get the message across to the other party.

Born (2010) stated that despite the importance of English in business communication, foreign language competence facilitates especially relationship and network building when conducting international business. Foreign language competence influences the international buyer and seller relationships, establishes trust, signals commitment and respect for the customer, and has a major effect on the atmosphere that characterizes the relationship.

Moreover, needs for effective communication is not restricted to external communication with clients or suppliers. A company must have effective means to communicate internally, thus language is a key issue also in internal communication (Pekkari:1999).

Examined the role of language in the development of personal cultural identity, empirically finding that knowledge of languages certainly facilitates a broader worldview. Most importantly, foreign language skills tend to make us more tolerant and open to other ideas and make us more comfortable with new experiences and situations, increasing our ability to effectively navigate encounters with new ideas and new ways of doing things. In a multilingual and multicultural world, foreign language skills and knowledge of other cultures are the essential global competency and social skill.

Careers

In the Handbook of Career Studies wrote by Gunz & Peiperl that the field of career

studies is and has been very fragmented and researchers seldom agree on which topics influence careers the most.

Arthur at al (1989) defines career as evolving sequences of a person's work experiences over time. This definition implies that career is a structured steady line going one direction from bottom to the top and does not reflect the modern changing nature of careers.

Gunz and Peiperl (2007) raise question of whom the career should be fit for, diving also into factors of extrinsic and intrinsic career success measures. The most commonly investigated influences were demographical matters such as the age or gender of the person, or the human capital factors such as work experience or education. The aim of this empirical research is to take a closer look on how language skills, or the lack of them, can be seen as a factor influencing career mobility and career success.

1. Career Mobility

Hegedus & Haman (1992) define career mobility as individual job change cycles in an employee's personal life and some researchers argue that human capital factors influence career objectives and mobility and can be explored from two different perspectives: horizontal and vertical mobility.

This means, according to Ibarra (2002), that career mobility maybe towards a position that is higher or similar to a job in the same field. The authors refer to horizontality in career mobility as moving sideways within an organization's hierarchy, for example means, to different assignments, to different departments, without being promoted upward. Verticality in career mobility means, on the contrary, moving up in an organization's hierarchy to more responsible positions, for example, to become a specialist expert, or to supervisory and managerial jobs.

2. Career Success

Arnold (1997) argues that careers can be measured in terms of pay, promotion and

status. Subjective career success is harder to define as the terms of definition are subjective to each individual. Common factors in measuring subjective career success is the subject itself, career and general life satisfaction. Also Gunz & Peiperl (2007) write about extrinsic and intrinsic career success the former meaning measures of salary, number of promotions and occupational status, and the latter the subjective ranking of one's satisfaction with one's career.

The researcher tends to use Arnold's terminology because it is a more self-explanatory term and more represent the interviewee's opinion.

3. Language effects on careers in the X international organization on organizational level

Lauring and Selmer stated (2011) that there is no doubt that globalization has had its effects on how organization's view language, or at least the question of language cannot be overlooked. Language is one of the main means of communication on knowledge sharing, and multicultural organizations are often said to have the potential knowledge resources to increase performance.

The requirements for employees' foreign language skills in international organizations and multinational corporations have been on the rise in the 21st century. Piekkari (2008) argues that international mergers and acquisitions that constantly shape the business has shifted focus from solely professional skills towards requirements on language capabilities.

However, the view of language skills' effects on career progression is still seen as quite narrow, even though it could open doors to opportunities that might otherwise be unattainable. The narrow appreciation of language skills can partly have its roots in the strong position of English as the lingua franca of the business world. In order to ease communication, many companies choose English as the common corporate language but

the effect might be that employees' only required language skill is English.

From the point of view of knowledge sharing and communication language dissimilarities can cause uneven patterns of interaction and knowledge sharing. In contrast to the belief that diversity in groups is seen as beneficial, language differences can have a negative impact on interaction and knowledge sharing when the group members have inadequate language skills.

4. Language effects on careers in organization on individual level

Language effects on careers from the individual person's perspective have had little attention in academic research.

Language skills may provide the individual the ability to establish networks that provide career opportunities or a specific language skill can give the individual a cutting edge over another candidate for a coveted position in the organization/ company. As per writer found in her research that bilingual individuals in the international organization she works for, local employees who speak good English as the common corporate language can become gatekeepers that get opportunities as well as responsibilities in the office that go beyond the scope of their actual position, due to their language capabilities. For instance, those who had a native level knowledge of English in the organization got interpreting/ translating tasks of important documents/ important event that were beyond their normal duties.

The above mentioned findings in the writer research speak for language's role as an enabler or barrier for career mobility. An individual with good language skills might be able to use his/ her language skills as facilitator in networking and finding new opportunities. His or her language skills may facilitate career mobility within the organization/ company both horizontally and vertically.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher chose a qualitative research method for the empirical part of the study as the main aim of this research was to find out how English and language skills affect a person's career in terms of mobility and success. Interviews with personnel from the case organization, provide the opportunity to observe the views and experiences of the interviewees and to find out how they fit in to the prior research done on this subject. As Bogdan & Taylor (1975) have stated that qualitative methodologies produce descriptive data in people's own written or spoken words. The interviews were semi-structured and the interviewees were encouraged to describe their experiences openly and freely. However, in order to ensure the preciseness of the results questions by the interviewer were also made when needed.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Interview Findings

During the course of the interviews it became clear that at least the organization X operates in the organization official language very effectively. According to some comments the ability to use English language is very important in the organization; especially to keep good communication with upper level of the International Organization X and other international organizations. People make an effort to speak English. However, it was recognized that the phenomenon of English as business language does not stretch throughout the entire organization. One interviewee currently working in the Facility Management and he speaks on

behalf of his staff who works as technicians:

“I know that our official language is English but in my office, some technicians who have limited English keep avoiding to communicate directly with the American officers just because they don't have enough confidence to do it, it is understandable but it will not improve their English skills. You know that our Officers are never bothered with our grammar, they usually understand what we are trying to say even it is not in a good composition or complete sentences, so it is ourselves who create the limitation and boundary in English”

One of the HR interviewees had a strong opinion that the international Organization X would need an official language strategy because the official common corporate language still being a big issue for some of employees who have very limited English:

“It's not that you cannot survive without English, but some of us need to improve our English periodically and regularly, so we can catch up with this organization objectives. If we have the language strategy in place, not only that we can develop ourselves, it will make our job a lot easier, effective and efficient, absolutely!”

And some of the interviewees wondered why there could not be an official strategy that would align what is anyway done in practice when it comes to language practices. The reason might have been given in their own answers to the question, if they encounter difficulties caused by language issues in their daily work; some reported misunderstandings but the general view was that the existing practices were enough and it was clear that English is the main language for

communication. Yet, there were some reports of cultural misunderstandings and communication difficulties caused by English.

The multilingual approach to language matters was often seen as a must by the HR interviewees. It was clear to all that employees are expected to work in English and speak at least a good level of English; and it was also seen as a prerequisite to work in the first place. This view was also supported by the fact that the recruitment advertisements are in English and the applicant have to apply it in English.

However, even basic language skills seemed to lower that language barrier:

“To clarify, I have always, whenever I have been in the other office which not I’m familiar with, just in the sense of good manners, and being polite, wanted to learn to say “Hello” and “Good Morning” and “Thank you”... and have some basic skills outside work situations. I think it’s part of this motivation thing to try and find the small things that help you fit in a bit.

On the other hand, the common corporate language was seen as a facilitator for career mobility by all interviewees both on HR and individual side. One of HR interviewee commented that:

“Anybody who can speak English at any level has the same advantage as native (English) speakers because anywhere you go in the world then you can communicate as well as if you would like to move to the other positions/ offices.”

Also, the HR interviewees pointed out that the official common corporate language is also a statement from the organization side to the employees on what the key language requirement is and where

the company wants to position itself in the global world.

Other interesting comments from the interviewee regarding to career mobility and career success:

“My English is not bad, I can apply to other position if I want it, but I am now comfortable with what I do, I love my colleagues here in the office and the Bosses are very nice to me so I can’t find any reason why I have to apply/ move to the other position. Finding a better job/ higher position is not my goal. Success is not always about getting higher position that you can get, but when you know that you can do your job well, you have a good relationship with the others, your family is okay, you are HAPPY, that’s enough for me, more than enough”.

Most of the interviewee agree that English is very important for their career mobility and career success, because to get higher position it needs certain level of English competency. If they want to have the job you

Recruitment

Based on a discussion the writer had with one of the HR, the recruitment language in the International Organization X is by rule English. She stated that it is really not even a discussion but a rule that all the recruitment advertisements are published in the official language of the organization, even if it opens internally. The recruitment team plays an important role in providing their expertise in finding the right talent for the company. She says that the recruiting language plays a role in both building the image of the organization and attaining the right talent for each position.

The choice of recruitment media is also important. She points out that an open vacancy advertisement is not only in the official website but also in printed media as well.

Also, the recruits coming from outside the organization have a global image of International Organization X. When asked why they have applied for a position in the organization, many say that the reason is the willingness to work for an international organization with rotation possibilities and the option to work abroad and on a global scale, yet many stress the fact that they value International Organization X is very high/ prestige.

According to HR person the most important information about the applying candidate is prior work experience, previous employers and good references. As good as all positions in International Organization X require a very good, or at least good level of English. That is often nonnegotiable, as well as local language is still an asset. She also explains that she often asks the reason the candidate has left his or her previous jobs in order to ensure that there is a natural and understandable reason for the career moves.

Training & Development

Most of trainings are conducted in English, but sometimes it is held with bilingual: the trainer will speak in English and there will be someone who translates it to Bahasa Indonesia. This is considering that not all employee have a good understanding of English language.

The international organization X provides English language course/ training with different subjects/ discussions to improve the English skill of the employee but it is not held regularly.

Language effects on careers in International Organization

Language effects on careers in International Organization from organizational point of view:

International Organization X official language is English, based on the research, despite English being the common corporate language, some of employee who have limited English would possibly see that as a barrier for their career development.

Therefore, the common corporate language being English can be seen as a facilitator for career mobility with a positive influence on the variety of the individual's career possibilities and success. From organizational point of view the outcome can be interpreted as positive since by defining the common corporate language as English, International Organization S seems to be able to get the full potential from manning positions with the right people when language matters are not a hinder. The fact that English was recognized so strongly as the main language in International Organization X.

In recruitment, were announced internally and externally always in English, enabling anyone with English language skills to apply for the position and allowing the company to choose the best candidate with the right set of skills and background. Also in recruitment, no other language skill requirement was raised to the level of English, but they were seen as an asset. One of HR interviewees stated that career mobility can be influenced positively by language skills in the sense that if you are for instance the employee of International Organization X, performing well in your work and possessing some other language

skill, you might get the opportunity to move and work in International Organization X and get valuable experience there. In that sense, people who have good English competency can be seen as a real asset for the organization because they are able to transfer their professional skills to multiple environments.

From organizational point of view, English as common corporate language seems to work in favor of career mobility with a positive influence on success. However, the overall perspective of the linguistic environment did have an effect on the daily life and networking of the individual employees. For example, in HR many documents, rules and guidelines are in English.

Language effects on careers in UPM from individual point of view:

When asked what the interviewees thought affects career mobility the most, the most popular answers were English, attitude, experience, skills and integrity. Language skills were absolutely seen as important when asked specifically if language skills affect career mobility and career success in the international organization X. What was interesting is that the interviewees that were bilingual/ multilingual stated, that their language skills affected more their own reasoning of what kind of positions they strived for because they wanted to use their language skills at work.

One interviewee explained that he had gotten additional task beyond his current positions thanks to her Exceptional English skill and said that in general that had a positive effect on his perception of his own career success. Another interviewee told that she needs to help out her colleague who struggles with English on a daily basis,

thus receiving also the helping role besides her own work. The extra helping role was experienced as stressful from time to time but in general made her more familiar with the colleague's area increasing her own professional skills in the unit. On HR side, the networking abilities and capabilities were identified as an important facilitator for career mobility and success.

One interviewee said that she had applied for a position that she did not get due to the fact that she did not have the English level that is required for the job. Naturally, this was something that she felt was one of the major reasons herself for not having a very good English skill. Of course, there are positions need to have a good relationship with the Government of Indonesia and other stakeholders which need a good communication skill and negotiation in local language.

Discussion

The individual's own English competences affect career mobility.

The research presented pros and cons of language strategy options from the viewpoint of career mobility. The empirical research on the common corporate language strategy as facilitator or barrier for career mobility implicated that the choice of English as common corporate language was generally seen as a facilitator for career mobility. Moreover, if the individual possessed English language skills it had a positive effect on the individual's career mobility within the International Organization X and that in turn had a positive influence on the individual's perception of his/ her own career success.

On the other hand, the empirical research did not suggest that the

interviewees, in the individual interviewee group or HR interviewee group, saw foreign language skills as unimportant for career mobility and career success as suggested by Enderwick and Akoorie (1994) and Bloch (1995). Rather language skills were seen as a competitive advantage, a facilitator for relationship and network building for new career opportunities.

Also, the common corporate language being English was seen as a neutral and clear language choice for an international organization. Additionally, the level of English language skills of employees was ensured always in the recruitment phase in order to neutralize disturbances in communication due to lack of language skills. This counteracts the phenomenon described by Mäkelä et al. (2007) where inadequate language skills have a negative impact on interaction and knowledge sharing. According to the empirical findings the individual's own language competence affected his/ her career decisions in the way that multilingual employees strived to make career choices that enabled them to benefit and use their language skills. The multilingual interviewees also reported similar events such as Borenius (2009) about receiving additional tasks beyond the scope of their regular duties thanks to their language skills which had a positive influence on their own perception of their career success.

How does the common language act as a facilitator for career mobility/ success?

In addition to language skills, when asked about what affects career mobility, the interviewees identified professional skills and track record of previous positions,

attitude and communication/ social skills as factors affecting career success. The open recruitment process of International Organization X was also identified as a major facilitator for career success by all the interviewees.

The facilitators' positive effect on career mobility also influenced the employee's subjective as well the objective measures of career success. The perceived facilitators were: International Organization X strategy, practices and common corporate language, professional competences, common corporate language skills, attitude and communication skills.

Organization level barrier for career mobility was local language requirement in certain positions where local language knowledge is needed. That was found to be a barrier for career mobility and affecting the subjective but not objective perception of the employee's career success. Furthermore, the individual level barrier: lack of local language skills was not necessarily perceived as a hindrance from the organization side for career mobility as the common corporate language is perceived as enough in International Organization X in general. However, on individual level, the barrier can affect subjective career success in terms of difficulties with fitting into requested level of English skill.

CONCLUSIONS

In the international organization X's environment where business is conducted mostly in English, the common corporate language was seen as a facilitator for career development, as well as facilitator for knowledge sharing and communication in general. However, it was acknowledged

that English is not widely spoken despite its official status as common corporate language. Some of the employee still find it as a barrier in communication.

The interviewees defined their perception of career success mostly by subjective terms meaning that career success for them was being happy about what they got to do, contributing to the organization's and coworker's success and being able to develop and challenge themselves.

When specifically asked about the importance of career mobility, or other subjective career success determinants, one interviewee said that of course it was something that had to be on a certain level. Moreover, two interviewees, one of the individual group and one HR interviewee said that their career goal was definitely not aiming to be a Director for something but being recognized as an expert in their own field and getting experiences to widen their knowledge rather than moving up in the hierarchy.

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