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Language Awareness in the Workplace

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Abstract:

This article is exploring the use of language by the individuals of a group who are active members of a team. Real examples are given to further investigate the language awareness in real life communications.

Key Words: Language, Awareness, Workplace, Team, Individuals

1. Introduction

Working in a team can enhance a great experience for a participant in a group work. The enhancements can be new information, the way of dealing with subject matters, and communication with people who may have different ideas. Those features are mostly very important to be existed in a person who looks for a good employment opportunity. It is a reality that most employers try to employ someone with those and some other characteristics like a good command in using technology. Integrating to a work environment is significant for an employee to perform an acceptable performance. To be a successful person in a workplace, being aware of cross cultural and different types of community of practice has its significance.

As a part of Language Awareness in the Workplace, the students had to work in one of the projects which were offered to participate. One of them was "Wish upon a Star" and the other one was "Equality and Diversity at UCLan". All the students decided to go with the first one because the majority desired to take part in it and the minority of students did not like the idea of creating a small group. "Wish upon a Star" is a project which leads to publishing a book about star and constellation stories for children. The aim of the book is to provide the readers, who are supposed generally to be children, with constellation and star beliefs in India and the UK. The master students in English Language and Literature were requested to contribute some cultural facts and beliefs about sky issues to the content of the book.

The preparation for the project started in early December 2011 and the book is expected to be published around July 2012. This report is written to show what were done to contribute to the project and the way which steps were taken. It explores the writer's, who was a group member, weaknesses and strengths which are very important to be discovered for improvement. The benefits will also be mentioned as the most participants could obtain new skills or at least improving the existed ones.

2. Community of Practice

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2.1. An Introduction to Community of Practice

The term community of practice (CofP) is frequently mentioned in the modern world, especially when individuals exist in a group form to take a responsibility. Lave and Wenger (1991: 98) define the term: "A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice." That is to say, communities of practice are groups of codes which understood and used by the same members of a group. In other words, communities of practice are the ways of communication among the members of a group to achieve the common aims.

Hardcastle and Powers (2004) see community of practice as an application to practice skills to make communication in community groups, organizations or institutions. The relation among individuals is based on the community practice. In other words, it is a community of practice which arranges an acceptable relationship among members of a group. The members can communicate with each other through some common communication rules which are known by all the other members as they are familiar with the community they gathered in.

Communities of practice are everywhere; human beings belong to several communities of practice in different time and places: at home, work, school, or in hobbies (Wenger, 1998). It can be said that a community of practice can be found in all aspects of life and it is the main tool of communicators. It is a tool which helps human beings to communicate and share ideas. They can understand each other through it and they can express themselves easily. As a result of this argument, community of practice involves in all forms of communication or it is the basic and it's the way which makes communication. Wenger (1998: 84) claims that there are three dimensions of a community of practice which are: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. To understand these dimensions, looking at an example can be helpful before defining them. A large company which consists of many departments can be a good sample to give the reader a clear overview about the dimensions. The managers of departments can altogether engage in a group meeting which is arranged for all of them to discuss the goals of the company and they mutually engage. They may have a joint enterprise from discussing the achievements among themselves. The managers can also have shared repertoires by exchanging stories of achievements and other events.

2.1.1. Mutual Engagement

This is a regular interaction which people in pairs or groups discuss general issues (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 1999). This type is very simple which usually does not need arguments or debates. It is general discussions and it is the basis of relations. It can be said this one is used when the

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members have a shared goal and they all work to achieve it. As a result, the members communicate through this type of CofP because the target is the same. The communication can be while drinking a coffee or small meetings.

2.1.2. Joint Enterprise

It is more than a shared goal and needs process; complex relationships are involved in this dimension (Wenger, 1998). Members usually debate and have more serious meetings for longer hours.

2.1.3. Shared Repertoire

This dimension is the most complex one which linguistic resources involve in and The meetings are more serious in which gestures, pictures and regular meals become a part of the CofP (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 1999). The members of a group negotiate the meaning which shows disagreement sometimes.

2.2. Community of Practice of the MA English Language and Literature team

The group consisted of different people from different cultural and educational backgrounds. There was a main goal which was a contribution to publish a book and all the members worked for the same aim. It is worth mentioning that there was a main group in which sub groups involved in. My course mates and two of the tutors were members in a subgroup. This sub group mainly arranged meetings for its members and attended once the general meeting of the whole group. The whole group, which was the main one, included MA English Language and Literature team, MA Publishing Team and MA Creative Writing for Children Team.

The common goal of the main group and subgroups was the same which was preparing the content for the book. Each group and individual had different duties; the duties were divided among the subgroups through their educational backgrounds. My group was supposed to carry out a research and collect data related to cultural beliefs as our educational background relates to language, culture and literature. Our part was exploring the beliefs in India and the UK about constellations and stars. Two members of the group had an Indian background and two members were British who were familiar with the beliefs in the UK. The other three members had no background about both countries and they tried to help those members to collect data and find information about both cultures.

Regarding the power, all the members were equal in terms of controlling or managing the project. None of the members in the whole group including supervisors were more powerful. All the ideas were discussed and they were arranged to create a good content to the project. In brief, all the members decided on the content of the project and there was not anyone to have a final decision as the group generally decided on the final decision.

3. Discursive Chosen Community of Practice

Discursive means everyday talk and it is a multi-utterance of talk; in order to analyze a conversation, meeting or talk, discursive should be analyzed (Tracy, 2002). Tracy (2002) argues that a talk is called discursive practice rather than a talk because it leads us to recognize the talk not like just a single thing, but to see it like an activity which has different parts. To interpret a talk, all the aspects like culture, speakers' power status, politeness/ impoliteness and the others should be analyzed. After considering all these aspects, the exact meaning behind that speech might be explored and understood. As a result, it can be said that discursive practices are mainly used in conversation analysis to see how a conversation is conversed to show how successful it is.

The language of communication for the MA English Language and Literature team was English as nobody could talk the first language of some other participants. Some of the members of the team had different accents but it did not affect the communication. All members' speech tone was fine and it was always stayed at an average level which was considered polite. All the members of the team started studying in the same course since September 2011 and continued till late May 2012, but still some members of the group sometimes confused some other members' names or even they did not know. This case shows that there was a lack of communication among some of the members and they did not have tight relations with each other. If the confusion or not knowing the names does really prove this, that means the relation among members of the team had to be tighter to enhance higher achievements.

In terms of the practices of the MA English Language and Literature team, it can be said that power was essentially equal as all the members worked all together. The decisions were taken through evaluating all the individual ideas and the ones, which were believed to be the best, were chosen. Generally speaking, the power did not have an important role as a community of practice in the group. The tutors who worked with us did not have a power of leading the project to any direction which they might desire. Their role was to guide us and answering our questions about the project to do our part very well as all student members were new for such a research and project.

The practices like jocular and politeness were very common. There were many different ideas about the project and all the participants tried to show their thoughts to be admitted by other members. All the discussions were done in a very polite and friendly environment. To the best of my knowledge, cultural differences never made a problem. The obstacles or problems were solved through jokes and indirectly without harming any member. For example, a member of the group had always a problem with time managment; the member usually arrived to the meetings late. Other members did not react or sometimes I used jokes as a reaction, like telling that the member was supposed to arrive later and the moment

was taken humorously. I personally tried to solve all the problems without making any trouble for the team. As it has been mentioned, the late arrivals or not attending was the biggest issue for the team. In such cases, other members volunteered to do the job which was considered to be done by someone else. In spite of this, those members who had such problems were encouraged to participate the meetings and to share towards the project.

Collectivism and individualism had their influence on the members but they did not change the direction of the activities. The members of the team were divided equally on both these cultural backgrounds. The members who came from collectivistic cultures desired to arrange more meetings, while people from individualistic cultures did not mind and they thought the discussions could be done by using Facebook and emails. A member who was from a collectivist culture was not very happy as we did not have as many meetings as that member preferred to have. In spite of this concern, all other members including others from collectivist cultures were quite happy about the progress of the project. High context and low context was another difference like collectivism and individualism, but I never felt about its existence. All the members were very friendly and as it had been mentioned earlier, the power was equal which did not make any difference among us to recognize this matter.

4. Employability Outcomes

The project was an opportunity for me to improve the skills which directly relate to my future employment. Communication skills were among the most important ones that I needed. In my undergraduate study, I did not have any group works; though, this project was the first one in my life which I became a group member to carry out a research. Communicating with people from different academic level and nationalities made me more communicable. This is a very important feature for a person to have it while seeking an employment opportunity. After the period of the project and communicating to the members of the group, now I am more confident in terms of contacting other people. The key point here is confidence because it can be increased through practicing the skills in real workplaces. To be honest, I was not very confident in my communication in the past, but now a serious improvement can be seen. This improved skill is a significant outcome of working on the project. It can definitely be said that I will communicate easier in the future and it is a very important feature to have to be more employable.

Time management is another issue which I see as an employability outcome of this project. I usually had been good at managing my time, but when started this project, the skill needed improvements. During the work of the project, many weaknesses could be found about the time management skills. Through consulting other members and external sources, some of the negative points were changed to positives. This point is very important for

my future employment and career because success can be the result of good time management. I was provided with very useful leaflets and sources by the tutors about this issue. After reading them, I found that I had to manage my time better as it was not great. Now, my time is managed better and I can have more activities as the least amount of time is spent carelessly or without a plan. I have many goals that I work hard to achieve them. My main targets are obtaining higher degrees and learning more to have a better employment opportunity. Trying to reach all the achievements need a good plan which requires managing time very well. This skill can have a main role in my future employability.

The dream employment for me is working in a group which consists of people from different cultures and nations. Such an employment essentials cross cultural skills, that is to say, someone with a good knowledge of different cultural aspects. The group of people which involved in the project was quite diverse. I worked with people who had different ideas and attitudes. It was a good introduction for me to learn some basics of dealing with people who may think differently especially with different customs. It does not look like having a conversation with someone who the same culture is shared with. In this sense, communicators should be more careful to avoid misunderstanding. After communication with all the members of the team, my cross cultural information increased significantly.

We had many meetings to discuss the project; a great number of people from different courses and positions attended to the meetings. In the meetings, I usually could improve my leadership skills as I always tried to participate and contribute something to the meetings. It can be said that being active in a group can enhance leadership skills because usually active people become leaders. Problem solving was another issue which I could recognize it from myself; I could solve some of the problems in a few meetings. While my leadership and problem solving skills were improving, my self-confidence increased significantly. As people relied on me sometimes and they wanted me to speak at the meetings, I became more confident in communicating with other people. This helped me to recommend solutions and new ideas with less hesitation.

Using technology to enhance a group aim was another new thing for me. Facebook was generally used to update group members about the recent changes of the project and sometimes, the ideas were discussed there. We had two Facebook groups: one of them was shared between students of my course and MA publishing students, the other one was dedicated to the students of my course. The second one was not very active as we usually preferred face to face communication, but I usually became an active member of the first group. I used the group to update MA publishing students about our works. It was proven to me that a space on a social network can be very useful for a group to work on a project. People from a work

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place can have such a group to discuss issues and problems about their job or they can easily ask questions and search for the answers there.

Team work was very new for me and I found that it is more beneficial than doing a type of work individually. It could be seen that a team work was more successful than a work of an individual. In the project, I realized that to get great achievements for a group, a shared aim of the team is very important. That is to say, all the members of a group should work to achieve a target and the group achievements should be more important than individual attainments.