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THE LANGUAGE INDUSTRY'S INSIGHT INTO THE CURRICULUM DESIGN OF A LANGUAGE PROGRAMME

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Abstract

The design of an academic programme has always been hypothetical. This usually results in a mismatch between the graduates and the requirements of the industry. Therefore, this paper attempts to look into the language industry's perception towards the curriculum design of a language program offered in University Teknologi MARA. It aims to determine if the design fulfils the requirements of the industry by getting the answers to two learning constructs, which are knowledge and skills. The responses gathered from 13 language industry key-players from a focus group interview were qualitatively analysed and described. The responses were also supported by their verbal comments on the student final project presentation and the written responses on an open-ended survey. The findings reveal that the design fulfils the needs of the industry in terms of skills and knowledge but lacks details. Therefore, a review of the curriculum was suggested to strengthen communication skills, computer-based skills, presentation skills, writing mechanics, research skills, intellectual property rights, sales and marketing skills, and personal and interpersonal skills. In addition, they also suggested adding new topics into the Translation course and Publishing course in relation to some of the skills required. Only one new course to be introduced in the structure, that is a third language course.

1. Introduction

The academic language programme offered at the diploma level by MARA University of Technology was developed using a backward design. According to Richards (2013), the backward design approach of a curriculum begins its development with statements of output, which is the desired learners' performance. Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA), an assurance agency of the quality of higher education in Malaysia also adopts Outcome-based Education (OBE) beginning in 2011 that advocates clear statements of competencies, intellectual and soft skills of the graduates (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2017) which supports the paradigm shift in higher learning education world-wide from "input-based conception" to "outcome-based notion" (Tremblay et al., 2012).

Hence, the process of designing the programme began with the following questions among others; what will the graduates be upon completion of their study? What will be the knowledge they attain upon completion of their study? And what will be the skills they can perform upon completion of their studies? The answers to these questions were written as the programme aim, Programme Education Outcomes (PEO) and Programme Learning Objectives (PLO). Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF) issued by MQA guided the process of writing these possible attainable outcomes. This framework is "an overarching framework for all post-secondary qualifications, with a set of objectives to be served and serviced by MQA." (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2017) which must be adhered to by all higher education providers in Malaysia.

In addition, MQA also issues program standards, one of the quality assurance documents providing guidelines for different levels of qualification; containing the minimum level of practices for different fields of study. In other words, these standards are an obligatory complementary document to guide academic programme developers in higher education providers to design new academic programmes and to assure their quality. For the design of this programme, Programme Standard: Language was used. This program standard is relatively new. Its first issuance was in 2019, followed by an updated version in 2020. In this standard, there is a description of the body of knowledge which was translated into the courses in the design of the programme's curriculum.

2. Problem Statement

Although the development of the said framework and standard involved various stakeholders including those from the language industry, they contain only the general minimum requirements without any reference to specific knowledge and skills needed by the industry. In addition, the introduction of the latest technology in the language industry is very dynamic making what was designed for the curriculum in 2016 may now be obsolete. The Globalization and Localization Association (GALA) admits that language services are very dependant on software like machine translation and AI-generated tools to manage and improve the services (GALA, 2020).

Consequently, the issue of fitness between the curriculum design and the demand of the industry arises. Do the Program Aim, PEO and PLO address the required knowledge and skills required by the industry? Obviously, the developers of the academic program were armed with a set of expected outcomes upon embarking the designing task while the industry has its specific requirements for

knowledge and skills. Do these expectancy and requirements match and thus, are graduates equipped sufficiently to be in the workforce in the industry?

3.   Research Questions

This study explores the industry's insights that would help to determine whether the design of the curriculum fulfil the requirements of the industry by finding answers to the following research questions.

    i.   Are the courses offered in the curriculum design of the language programme sufficient for the requirements of the language industry?

   ii.   Are the skills developed in the curriculum design of the language programme relevant to the requirements of the industry?

4.   Research Methods

It is only befitting to get the industry experts' insights to shed light on the issue: Has the curriculum of this language programme been designed to the requirements of the industry? Therefore, this study undertook a qualitative study method using content analysis of the language industry experts' responses in a focus group interview of which according to Krueger and Casey (2009) is very useful to elicit responses related to the topic among participants with specific attributes.

4.1. Participants

The thirteen participants for the study were purposefully selected through typical case sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) to represent the key players of the language industry; from industry owners to freelancers with a minimum of ten years experience. Among them, three of them are owners of companies that offer language services such as translation, proofreading and editing. Four of them are executives at various publication companies responsible for language and creative-related work such as editing, creating creative contents, and evaluating works to be published. One of the four sits in an international editorial board evaluating media contents worldwide. Another six are doing free-lance translation, creative writing, proofreading, educational materials evaluation, and creative content editing while holding permanent positions at executive level in various organizations. Thus, they are a composition of reliable stakeholders in the language industry, able to provide valuable insights with their experience and knowledge. The selection of participants is important to fit the construct of the study and the size of participants is sufficient when data saturation is achieved (Omona, 2013).

4.2. Data collection

Firstly, the experts were provided with the program's academic structure so that they were aware of the subjects taken by the students. They were also given all the course information consisting of the description, learning outcomes, contents, and assessments of each course. Next, they were invited to attend a focus group interview session with a panel of interviewers from the faculty. The interview session lasted for three hours, and the responses were recorded and transcribed.

Prior to the interview, these experts had become the panel of industry commentators for the students' final semester individual project. For this project, students' attainment of knowledge and skills learned throughout the five semesters of the program was evaluated. They were also assessed in terms of managerial and problem-solving skills as well as entrepreneur and inquisitive mindset. Thus, all the experts already had information on the skills and knowledge learned and the students' ability in completing the project. The interviewers were invited to give their comments and fill up an open-ended survey. The verbal comments for the final project and responses from the survey served to cross-examine the experts' responses from the interview for consistency and reliability as suggested by Nunes et al. (2019).

The focus group interview explored the following areas: Industry view on the curriculum design, basic skills required by the industry, technical skills required by the industry, and other matters pertaining to the industry in relation to the graduates of the programme. The open-ended survey given after the student project presentation required the expert to pen down their thoughts and opinions of the students' project and the programme overall. There are three sections in the survey; feedback on the students' project (weaknesses, strengths, entrepreneurial opportunities, suitability of final project in place of industrial training and career opportunities for students), feedback on the curriculum design (suitability and sufficiency of subjects for the program, the alignment of the subjects with the needs of the industry) and placement of graduates in the industry and other comments.

4.3. Data analysis

Data collected were first of all, notably rich and informative. Verbal responses were recorded, transcribed, and summarised. They were analysed qualitatively by paying attention to emerging responses from the participants; words, phrases, and context by which they were treated based on their consistency, intensity, and extensiveness (Krueger, 2002). Similarities and differences were noted and classified, and attention were given to frequently emerging responses as prevalent findings. All responses were analytically analysed and treated as saturated data when common findings in the responses were identified (George, 2021).

5. Findings

5.1. The design of the academic language program

The developers of the programme were responsible to determine first of all which of these learning outcomes outlined in the MQF were the most significant and useful for the programme. The outcomes, nonetheless, do not spell out the skills specifically. Reflecting the nature of the nature of the language programme, communication skills note the highest percentage (18%) of the total outcomes. It is followed by practical skills (13%), cognitive skills (12%) and digital skills (10%). They are followed by Interpersonal skills; leadership, autonomy, and responsibility; and personal skills, all at 8%. Ethics and professionalism; and knowledge and understanding both at 6% and lastly numerical skills at 1%.

Simultaneously, the developers also worked on designing courses based on the description of the body of the knowledge for language programmes in the Program Standard: Language. Next, the MQF

clusters need to be mapped to the courses developed. Table 1 shows the Frequency of MQF clusters mapped to course clusters. As shown, the courses are classified into three clusters with six courses under proficiency cluster, another six courses identified as content area cluster and 10 courses for work-based cluster.

Table 1. Frequency of MQF clusters mapped to Course Cluster

MQF CLUSTERS		COURSE CLUSTER		
		Proficiency-Based Courses	Content Area Courses	Work-Based Courses
1. Knowledge and understanding		2	3	0
2. Cognitive skills		4	2	3
3. Functional Work Skills	a. Practical	4	2	4
	b. Interpersonal	1	3	2
	c. Communication	5	1	5
	d. Digital	1	2	5
	e. Numeracy	0	0	1
	f. Leadership, autonomy, and responsibility	1	1	4
4. Personal and entrepreneurial skills	a. Personal skills	2	2	2
	b. Entrepreneurial skills	0	0	3
5. Ethics and professionalism		1	2	2

The six proficiency courses are reading, writing, listening, speaking and grammar offered in semester 1 and 2 emphasizing on communication skills, practical skills and cognitive skills. For six content area courses, they build on knowledge and understanding as well as interpersonal skills. There are 10 work-based courses, and they enhance communication and digital skills followed by practical skills and leadership, autonomy, and responsibility. This mapping however was a non-linear process by which a lot of adjustments were made along the way.

5.2. Skills

The experts were very articulate about the skill sets for the language industry as cited by few that skills are translated into workplace competence (Angelone et al., 2020; American Malaysia Chamber of Commerce, 2020; Camacho & Alexandre, 2019; MCMC, 2015; Xavier, 2022). The skills were discussed at length and continuously emerging when other areas such as the courses and curriculum structure were brought up. As the language industry is an interplay between both technical and soft skills, there was no separate discussion between the two sets of skills.

Figure 1 shows the skill sets for the language industry deemed important by the experts. The most important skills required is communication with an emphasis on the ability to communicate in various professional settings when dealing with clients. Human Resources Development Fund (2019) also claimed the lack of communication skills among graduates in Malaysia.
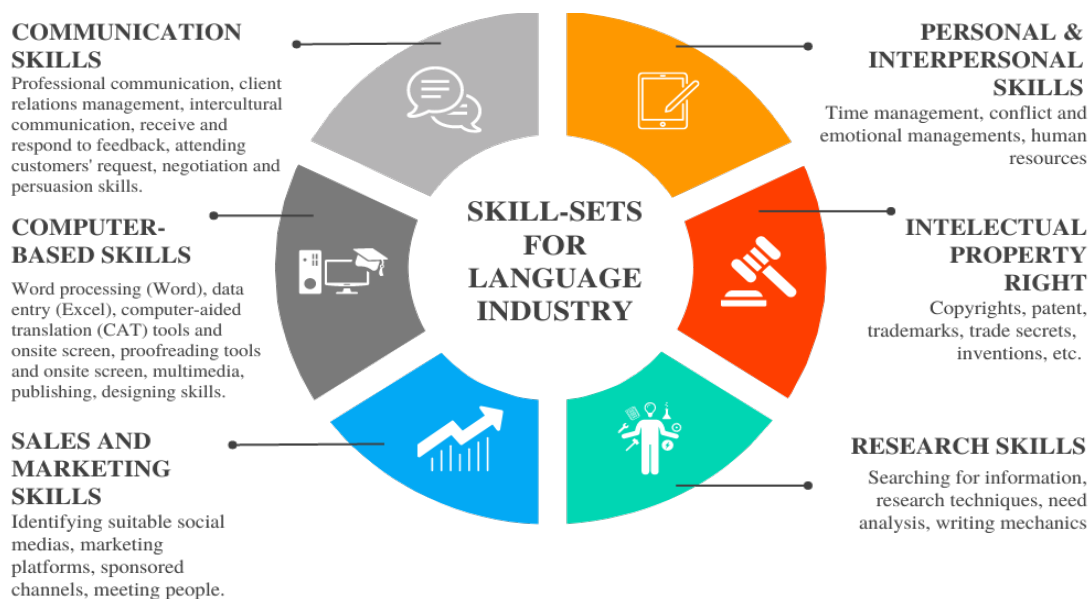
Figure 1. Skill sets for language industry

Among the specific skills mentioned were attending to requests from clients and receiving and responding to feedback. This is, according to the experts, very vital in unexpected situations when dealing with difficult clients. Thus, students should also be equipped with the ability to negotiate and persuade especially when determining charges for their services and products that would be able to position language service providers as visible (Dan, 2021). In addition, intercultural communication is also deemed as important due to the diversity of culture at the workplace and that their potential customers could reach an international audience. The experts also suggested that any courses related to these skills should simulate real-life situations and include current issues in role-play exercises for instance. Language in many ways is culture and thus the localization becomes a language service with the highest demand (Whiteley, 2020).

The next important skills discussed were computer-based skills; from the most basic skills of word processing and data entry to the use of language service tools available and required by the industry. The experts highly recommended the introduction of computer-aided translation and proofreading tools as well as onsite screens. Among the recommended tools were Trados, MS Word Tracking, Memsource and PRPM by DBP. They also suggested the inclusion of multimedia and publishing tools such as Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and In-Design to complement the computer-based skills. The emphasis on computer skills also applies to designing skills and the experts suggested the use of simple open source designing software and that students must know basic graphic design principles. Thus, the experts advocated the need to keep abreast with the current trend and tools available in the market since according to GALA (2020) and Looi and Lau (2021), the technology in the language industry is not only vigorous but is also demanded by clients.

Marketing and sales were the next most needed skills by the industry. These include the ability to market products and services on appropriate social media as well as available marketing platforms such as Shoppee and Lazada and sponsored channels available on YouTube and Facebook. The experts also believe that direct marketing skills, meeting potential customers, and doing effective sales pitch are vital.

The Economic Planning Unit (2009) stated that marketing skills are important to build resilience to sustain in the industry.

The experts also agreed that students need to be equipped with research skills which include the ability to search for information on products, services, and clients, doing need-analysis, and finding the right techniques for market survey and eventually to transfer these research findings into content writing. It is also beneficial if the students too are prepared with intellectual property rights knowledge that can assist in understanding copyright issues and getting patents for their works in order to avoid them from falling into the trap of plagiarism and to protect their works respectively. Last but not least, the experts cited the needs of personal and interpersonal skills. These include conflict and emotional management skills, time management skills and human resource skills which are deemed important for the development and sustainability of their professional careers especially if they choose to do free-lance jobs.

5.3. Courses

The experts' insights into the courses offered in the curriculum structure was interesting even though it may not be as detailed as the discussion on skills. They neither proposed adding nor dropping any courses. They were more concerned about the knowledge the students should be equipped with thus, to strengthen the existing courses and to add suggested topics in any suitable courses. It is worth noting that the mention of skills kept emerging when courses were discussed. Figure 2 shows the suggested enhancement of topics to the already existing courses in the curriculum design.

Figure 2. Enhancement of topics and courses in the curriculum design

From Figure 2, the focus for the Publishing course should not be on one type of publishing but to also include desktop publishing and content conversion from one publishing type to another. They also believed that students should be exposed to e-publications such as Kindle, Create and Cygil. Next, For the Translation course, the experts suggested the addition of translation of fiction works, legal and formal documents as well as interpretation as they are the demands in the market. The experts also suggested the inclusion of business and professional communication topics for both written and spoken skills. The only addition of the new course was third language courses of any Asian or European languages. Knowing a

third language does not only assist students to better understand how languages work but it also boosts their confidence. Most importantly it is an asset for them to work internationally and to get the extra allowance if they are working in-house.

5.4. Curriculum design versus industry needs

In essence, all but one agreed that the curriculum design meets the industry needs. They cited reasons such as the design is general enough for diploma students to learn all the knowledge, they need to prepare them for the workforce. The generality allows students to explore the various areas in the language industry such as translation, proofreading, editing, creative content creation, copy writing thus choosing their forte for their career. They also agreed that the curriculum design does equip the students with basic skills needed for the industry particularly their language skills. The students were applauded for their excellent use of English during their presentations as well as in the end-products of their final semester project.

The absence of industrial training has its merit; students were trained to opt for self-employment. This produces very independent graduates who plan for themselves instead of attaching to an employer waiting for instructions. The final semester project was considered as a suitable replacement for the industrial training provided that the industry players are kept informed and involved in the project. The project also showcased the students' creativity, innovativeness and entrepreneur mindset that prepared them for the real-world prospects.

The only reservation for a partial agreement to the design was that it lacks communication with and connection to the real people be them the potential clients, employers and fellow industry players. Thus, the suggestions to review the methods of learning activities and assessments should be given high consideration when revising the curriculum. It is also recommended that the program be promoted more rigorously to the stakeholders, which include industry leaders, potential students, language industry community and the society at large.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the experts believe that the curriculum design of the language program does meet the needs of the language industry however, there is a need for some improvement. First, to enhance three important skills namely communication skills, computer-based skills, and sales and marketing skills. The other skills that are equally important are research skills and intellectual property rights knowledge. personal and interpersonal skills which can be an added value to the program overall and the graduates' professional career. All of these can be embedded into the existing courses in the design. In addition, they also suggested adding new topics into the Translation course; Machine Translation and Interpretation, and Publishing course; Conversion of Publication. Only one new course to be introduced in the structure is a third language course.

This study implicates that with the inclusion of suggested knowledge and skills, not only the students can fit into the language service industry but they can thrive beyond in other industries such as corporate, education, entertainment, creative arts, mass communication, creative media, journalism, film

making, graphic arts, advertising holding various positions such as Interpreter, subtitler, content creators, proof-readers, copywriters, creative writers (poetry, narration, script, web developers, entrepreneurs, marketers, promoters, consultants, trainers.

The industry's insights into this curriculum design is very informative and useful to the curriculum developers, instructors, students and the higher learning institute management team to take action on their suggestions which include improvement on teaching and learning activities and facilities. It is recommended that for future study, researchers attempt at profiling the knowledge and skills of language experts in the industry and for the profile to be a guideline for any language program development. With the end in mind, this is a curriculum by design - designing the future of the graduates.

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