

Work environment as a motivating factor for self-improvement of English: a case study of projects in CARE International in Vietnam = Môi trường làm việc với vai trò là yếu tố thúc đẩy việc tự hoàn thiện tiếng Anh: trường hợp các dự án của CARE quốc tế tại Việt Nam. M.A Thesis Linguistics: 60 14 10 \ Vũ Mai Giang ; Supervisor : Dr. Tô Thị Thu Hương

1. Rationale of the study

Since Vietnam started its “Doi moi” process, much attention has been paid to learning how to use English for communication. It is a fact that English teaching centres have mushroomed, learners rush out to evening English classes with a hope to gain better marks in the exams and get a good job. Even busy adults spend their limited time on learning English to better perform tasks, to get promoted, to find a better job in an English speaking environment or to study abroad. Motivation to learn English, hence, becomes more important than ever because it is the key factor affecting the success or failure in the language learning process.

Also since Vietnam opened its door to the outside world, more and more non-governmental organisations (NGOs) establish their representative offices in Vietnam and thousands of projects have been implemented for Vietnam’s sustainable development. More and more Vietnamese come to work for an NGO and often enjoy the work environment there. NGO environment is usually a multi-cultural, multi-lingual one where English is mainly used for communication. One question is raised: Can Vietnamese staff improve their English in such an environment and if so, how to improve?

Many studies have been conducted on English learning and teaching and many techniques have been suggested for brushing up one’s English. Though there are some studies focusing on the motivation to study English and how to maintain and strengthen such motivation at school and colleges, there are few or no studies on learning English and motivation to learn English after leaving colleges.

It is quite common that some English major graduates often complain that their English skills get worse after graduation because they do not have the environment to use it, their work does not require them to use English and they also do not have time for further learning. Some non-major graduates state that they want and they need to improve their English but they do not have an appropriate environment to learn and to use the language. In all these circumstances, the work environment plays a crucial role in determining whether employees have strong and long-lasting motivation to self-improve their English.

With the above mentioned reasons, the researcher would like to investigate English learning in an NGO environment and the role of work environment in motivating staff to improve their English. It is hoped that the research would be of great help for those working in an NGO in particular and elsewhere in general.

2. Research Questions

The study was conducted on the Vietnamese staff who are currently working for different projects in CARE International in Vietnam (hereafter abbreviated as CARE). It mainly aims to get the answers to three research questions as follows:

- 1) What are the types of motivation for self-improvement of English possessed by CARE Vietnamese staff?**
- 2) How motivating do CARE staff find the work environment for their self-improvement of English?**
- 3) What elements in the work environment mainly motivate them to self-improve their English?**

3. Significance of the study

Much research has shown the importance of social contexts or learning environments on second language learning. This study was carried out with the hope to provide language learners, especially those who work for an NGO with an overview of the role of work environment and its elements affecting their motivation to self-improve their English. It is hoped that, the findings from this study will make managers better understand their staff and hence, create more favourable opportunities for their staff learning in general and for their English learning in particular.

This study will not only help those working in CARE to reflect on their self-improvement of English but also help English learners to be aware of and make best use of their work environment in their path to English perfection. In the broader term, the study also might be useful for the organisations to make the strategic plan for human resource development and give an insight to informal learning at workplace.

4. Methodology

In order to achieve the primary purposes of the study, the case study was adopted in this study. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, this is because the study involves a specific case of projects in CARE International in Vietnam. Another reason is that the author has been a part of the “natural setting”. She has been working in CARE International in Vietnam for one year and a half.

This case study uses both qualitative and quantitative approach with questionnaire and semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tools for the given purpose to get an insight into CARE’s staff motivation to self-improve English at workplace.

A questionnaire of 17 questions was designed to explore CARE Vietnamese staff’s beliefs and viewpoints about the role of the work environment as well as its major elements affecting their motivation to self-improve their English. The questionnaire was composed of three parts. Part I aimed to gather the participants’ general information as well as their work experience, their positions in CARE and their learning English. While part II was employed to get CARE Vietnamese staff’s thoughts and opinions about the work environment in CARE and their types of motivation, part III focused on collecting their beliefs about elements of the work environment that influenced their motivation for English self-improvement. The questionnaire was sent to about 60 CARE Vietnamese staff, of whom 46 responded (accounting for about 76%) in both English and Vietnamese to increase the response rate,

The questionnaire was administered by internet due to some following reasons. The first one was that each CARE staff had an email address through Outlook express (they received it when joining CARE) and the researcher had the list of their email addresses and got their consent for participation in the research. The second and more important reason was that sending the questionnaire via email was fast, cheap and easy to reach the target groups and get feed back from them.

Beside the survey questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were the second instrument used to get the participants’ opinions, beliefs and attitudes. After the questionnaires were returned, a guideline for in-depth interviews was carefully designed, which aimed to clarify some points in the respondents’ feedbacks from questionnaires and to get more qualitative data. The nature of

qualitative questions, as pointed out by Lichtman (2006: 29), which “*tend to ask why and how rather than what and how many*” was clearly expressed in these questions.

In short, the author has used several methods of data collection in the study to get both qualitative and quantitative data. In given cases, some questionnaire respondents were further interviewed to ensure higher level of validity and reliability of the data.

5. Findings

Regarding the types of motivation possessed by CARE staff, the research has found out that 95.6 % CARE staff have integrative and intrinsic motivation, expressing through their utmost desire and need to communicate with the expatriates in their projects. About 78.2% staff possess instrumental motivation, nearly 20% lower than integrative motivation. Besides, many staff possess a combination of at least two types of motivation as they indicate several reasons for learning English in CARE such as to fulfil tasks, to communicate, to get promoted, to apply for a scholarship, to feel confident, to get knowledge.

Since integrative and intrinsic motivation have been found out to sustain long-term success, after working for CARE for a period of time, its staff’s improvement has been shown in the four language skills especially writing and reading skills.

What has motivated staff to have good language skills and to self-improve their English in CARE? The key is the work environment here. All CARE Vietnamese staff affirm the important and very important role of the work environment to their self-improvement of English though the importance of the work environment is perceived differently by staff in different positions. The work environment is perceived to be the most important to project managers and the least important to project officers due to the difference of work requirements and exposure to the target language.

Why is the work environment so important in promoting CARE staff’s motivation to self-improve their English? Learning environment or contexts, interaction and the work itself are the most important elements. This is completely true applying to CARE’s context. Firstly, English is required when one comes to work for CARE and in their daily task, little or much, they need English to write reports, to read materials, to use emails for work purposes, to discuss and exchange about work, to attend workshops and meetings. Secondly, the relationships among peers

and between colleagues and supervisors in CARE are friendly and supportive enough so that people can feel free to ask a difficult term in English and others are willing to explain and translate that word if they know. Thirdly, the opportunities of getting promoted and applying for an outside scholarship when working for CARE also motivate staff to increase their English abilities. Though the opportunities strengthen the instrumental and extrinsic motivation, they are also very important to adult learners.

6. Discussion

Though the work environment in CARE really support CARE's staff motivation to learn English and it staff have very high and strong motivation towards self-improving their English, when being asked about the schedule for self- learning, they seem not to have a very clear and specific plan. Up to 52.2% are undecided about the schedule while 34.8% agreed and 4.3 strongly agreed that they have a clear plan.

In the interviews, some gave the excuse for that as *“because I have accomplished my tasks as required”*, *“because now my English in use is good enough”* and also because *“I have small children to take care of so I cannot arrange my time for brushing up my English.”*

This is also understandable because from awareness and attitudes to behaviour change, there is still a gap. Though their motivation to learn English is high, it does not necessarily mean that they will learn English regularly and intentionally. Rather in the context that CARE staff have opportunities to communicate with foreigners and expose to materials in English frequently, the learning sometimes happens subconsciously.

7. Recommendations

From the major findings and discussion, there are several recommendations to improve English in CARE or some implications for a similar NGO setting as follows:

Firstly, since the work requirements are the most important element for self-improving English, one can take challenging and relevant tasks that require using English more and more. Supervisors can help and assign specific and challenging tasks (just one level more difficult) to motivate their staff to perfect their English.

Secondly, relationships or interaction are very important to learning English. One can learn successfully and sustain motivation when there is encouragement and mutual learning from colleagues and supervisors. Together learning, they can create a learning community with a specific plan. For example, a team of 3 or 4 people in one project can practise listening to BBC, reading aloud and commenting about the pronunciation for each other. Or a group of staff can share their writing essays on specific topics for comments and revision. This will create the learning culture within the organisation, which is very helpful to professional development and English enhancement.

Thirdly, it is advised that more and more opportunities be generated to maintain and promote staff's motivation. Better English can be an advantage for promotion or higher salary, for getting a scholarship or win a friendly competition within the organisation. For example, in CARE International, they have an essay writing competition among many countries in which CARE staff can share their impression or tell a story about what the communities have grown up thanks to the project activities.

In addition, as mentioned above, the learning culture is very important within one organisation. Duke (2002: 107) suggested:

“It is essential for an organization to look at its own cultural setting and devise a system of learning that best suits it”.

Though the policy in CARE is quite good already, it still needs to be reflected and improved to strengthen the learning at workplace.

Additionally, it is suggested that each staff should take the initiative role or ownership in their own learning. Though work environment in CARE is very good for learning in general and in this case study very good for improving English, each and every staff should take any opportunity to learn wherever and whenever. As this case study is an illustration, education and learning is a life-long process and in any environment, even after graduation or not in an educational setting, learning is always taking place and motivation for learning always live.

Last but not least, from the organisational perspective, since the work environment plays a vital role in learning, it would be helpful if the organisations and leaders have a strategic plan for human resource development with capacity building activities as well as create favourable conditions and policies that support working and learning.

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