

## Insights from the CSOC: Language Issues in the Communication of Safety Knowledge

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The Construction Safety Orientation Course (CSOC) is a compulsory course that all entering a construction site in Singapore must attend and pass. Basic safety training and safety procedures to adhere to for a construction site are taught. The stated aim of the course is to ensure that “the trainees should be able to recognize the safety hazards at construction site, know the preventive measures to be adopted, confident in working at height and understand the importance of observing safety signs and safe work procedures.” (Workplace Health and Safety Council, 2013)

The course takes place over two days, with the first day focusing on theoretical knowledge of safety, and the second on the practical aspect of safety. Theoretical content would include working at height, working in confined spaces, edge protection, care for machinery and other aspects. At the end of the first day, there would be a multiple-choice test on the content covered. To pass this component, the students must get at least 24 of the 40 questions correct. For the practical component, students are shown demonstrations of safety equipment in use, such as personal protective equipment, fall arrest systems, fire extinguishers, and must subsequently demonstrate to the examiner that they can competently use these systems.

Five interviews were conducted with the instructors of the CSOC to find out their insights on the transmission of safety knowledge to construction workers.

### **Use of English in the workplace**

The instructors noted that the use of English on construction sites was widespread, and adapted their lessons accordingly. They reasoned that as English was the most commonly spoken language of Singapore and the language that workers from different countries would use to communicate, the workers would eventually encounter English. Therefore, the instructors tried to introduce English terms to the workers in the setting of the classroom, where time could be specifically set aside to explain them to the worker. Terms taught to the workers included that of names for the equipment, such as harness and scaffold.

*Industry application:* although the CSOC introduces some English terms, because of time constraints, they cannot introduce technical terms that are specialised in each trade. Companies could take the time to formally introduce workers to the terms that they may be expected to encounter in their trade. This can help them to communicate more easily with workers from different countries. In addition to trade specific terms, it would be useful to teach workers simple English vocabulary so that they can communicate with other workers on the worksite. This will also be useful for the workers to help them navigate in Singapore.

## **Graphics in the workplace**

The CSOC features many graphics and images being used in the materials to teach workers. Graphics would be able to reach across to speakers of different languages. For example, situations that are dangerous were illustrated with photos. The instructors found that it was useful to illustrate the situation, especially for workers that had not previously been on a construction site. Even for workers that had been on a construction site, it was useful to show pictures, as they may not have been in that situation before. It was reasoned that this would make them more prepared to encounter the real situation. In addition, while many of the workers could read in their native language, it was observed to be difficult and taxing for the workers to do so. This manifested in difficulties with completing the written assessment.

*Industry application:* As much as possible, safety information on site should not be delivered in the form of text, but primarily through speech and graphics. While daily toolbox meetings are typically delivered verbally, supplementary safety information, such as reminder posters on site, are text based. These could instead be converted to more graphically based materials so that the information is more easily processed by the workers.

## **Literacy**

The instructors also mentioned that while the problem of literacy would not affect workers in a noticeable way during their everyday work life, it becomes important for any worker that is elevated to the level of a supervisor. Supervisors must read and sign off on many safety related documents, and it is critical that they understand the content of said documents. While they may be fluent in reading their native language, difficulties arise when they are confronted with English documents. The instructors described this problem emerging in supervisor level training courses, where participants who generally understood the spoken material would not be able to read either the safety documents or the class materials. While they would try to guide them along and help them compensate, it was still important for the participants to be fluent in English.

*Industry application:* the problem can be approached from two angles. First, companies looking to promote workers could pick those who already have a firm grasp of written English. This would aid in their understanding of the documents required at a supervisor level. Second, companies could instead suggest to promising workers who have weaker English skills to brush up on their English skills instead. This will ensure that good workers are not overlooked.

## **Conclusion**

Observing the CSOC can allow us to understand some of the language related issues that workers face. While these issues may pose a challenge to workers and the companies hiring them, they can be overcome with effort from both parties.

Workplace Health and Safety Council. (2013). *Construction Safety Orientation Course for Workers (CSOC)*. Retrieved from <https://www.wshc.sg/files/wshc/upload/cms/file/2014/CSOC.pdf>

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