

## USE OF ENGLISH AT THE WORKPLACE: HOW FAR IS THIS TRUE IN MALAYSIA?

Noor Hanim Rahmat,  
Normah Ismail &  
Azizah Daut  
*Universiti Teknologi MARA Johor Bahru*

### Abstract

According to Ong et al. (2011), the importance of English in the Malaysian work environment is the main concern of many employers. Some employers reported that having employees with better English would improve productivity. How far is English being used at the workplace in Malaysia? This quantitative study targets at possible direction of a language programme such as English for Specific Purpose especially for Occupational and Vocational purposes. It looks into how much English is used at selected industries in Malaysia. Specifically, it reports on how communication in English is used at different departments in selected industries as well as how the use differs across age groups, genders and industries. Results of this study will have interesting implication for future English for business purposes courses.(125 words)

**Keywords:** work environment, industries, communication

### INTRODUCTION

Certain big cities in Malaysia like Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, and Penang are constantly receiving people from outside the country and English may be the easy medium of communication. Businesses in Johor Bahru may have to use English to cater to the neighbouring countries like Singapore, and Indonesia. Businesses in Penang and Kuala Lumpur may get the privilege to get constant flow of international visitors, and therefore English is seen as a necessity.

Based on the Malaysia Blueprint 2013-2025, every individual leaving school should be able to work both in a Malay and English language

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Direct all correspondence to:  
[patanim@gmail.com](mailto:patanim@gmail.com)  
[norma851@johor.uitm.edu.my](mailto:norma851@johor.uitm.edu.my)  
[aziza295@johor.uitm.edu.my](mailto:aziza295@johor.uitm.edu.my)

environment. Measures have been taken in schools to ensure that this will happen. Institutions of higher learning offer English proficiency courses to prepare for graduates to be able to use English for communication at their future workplace. How far is it true to say that English is used in the workplace in Malaysia? This research looks into this and in doing so, seeks to answer the following research questions:

The objective of this research is to look into the use of English at the workplace. Specifically, this research examines the use of English at the workplace based on the types of industries and departments within each individual company.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research is done based on these questions:

- (1) Which dimension of communication in English has the highest mean score?
- (2) How does communication in English differ across gender?
- (3) How does communication in English differ across industries?
- (4) How does communication in English differ across departments?

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **The Place of English in Malaysia**

Based on the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, students should be expected to be bilingual throughout their school days and beyond. In Malaysia, Bahasa Melayu is the taught as the first language and English is taught as a second language-although many still believe English is actually a foreign language for many. Sometimes at the primary school level (ages 7-12) the only time learners see/use English will be in the classroom –or in the school. Secondary school (13-19) in Malaysia may find English more useful especially if they jumped on the bandwagon of the gaming (on-line games) and the social media community. In addition, many download applications onto their mobile phones and accepted the fact that the instruction in the applications are mostly in English. As such, students leaving school would have a certain level of proficiency in the second language and are expected to communicate comfortably in English upon leaving school. At the school level, ESL learners are taught reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Thankfully, the spread of internet has made ESL learners realize the need to use English outside the classroom setting and many have extended the use in their social circle. In addition to that, the entertainment industry (movies,

television shows) has made the society realize that English is the medium of communication worldwide.

However, many would notice that upon leaving secondary schools, students may be more comfortable with the written form of English compared to the spoken form. This could happen because schools may put more emphasis on written proficiency rather than spoken. Students who get exposed to English only in the classroom –or schools –may still find English a foreign language in reality instead of the second language. It is therefore not uncommon to see students write reasonably good essays and score well in grammar test, yet are not able to speak well in English. This is worsened if the students are expected to go through interviews in English to take up certain courses in the universities in future.

When these learners enter higher institutions of learning, many universities in Malaysia, although may not officially declare English as a medium of instruction, the reading materials that students referred to are mainly written in English. Many local universities also comply to the ministry of higher learning's basic criteria by offering proficiency courses so that graduates entering the workforce are comfortable using English for communication. Proficiency courses at the university level include reading, writing, listening, speaking, presentation skills (in English), English for Occupational Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, Critical Thinking and many more. Again, at the university level, the Internet has helped a lot to make students realize the importance of English. Students will realize that materials needed for learning and writing assignments are "googled" from the internet and are all displayed in English. The social media has also helped a lot in exposing learners to the use of English for normal communication.

### **Use of English at the Workplace**

Crismore, Hwa Ngeow, and Soon Soo (1996) reported that English is widely accepted in Malaysia. They felt that the Malaysian society has accepted English as the medium of communication in many sectors. The use of English differs based on the type of industry. For instance, the education industry would use English as the medium of instruction, especially for communication among teachers-students. With the easy access of the Internet, students in higher institutions of learning would have to be familiar with the use of English. In addition to that, the Food/Hotel/Tourism would use English because Malaysia receives many tourists throughout the year and when it comes to dealing with different people around the world,

English becomes the lingua franca. The Banking industries in Malaysia deal with businesses around the world and that means English is used as well.

English is often the medium of communication within the departments in each industry. For many big companies –or companies in big cities like Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru and Penang – English may be used when it comes to communication with the Management. In addition to that, communication with the Employees and among Colleagues may also be done in English especially if the company deals with English-speaking corresponding partners. Finally, for many industries in Kuala Lumpur and other big towns in Malaysia, communication with the clients or customers may also be done in English.

### **Past Research**

There has been a great deal of research done to look into how much English in the work environment in Malaysia. The research by Nur Ehsan Mohd Said (2011) revealed that English was used as the language for correspondences within the banking industries. Documents were mostly written in English while communications with customers were also done in English.

The study by Isarji Sarudin et al. (2013) reported five dimensions considered important at the workplace in Malaysia. The dimensions were: the importance of English language proficiency at the workplace, employees preparedness to perform work in English, assessment of English competency in the recruitment process, employers' English language training and English competency certification test. Although the results reveal some dimensions showing more need for English language proficiency than others, it was still interesting to see how English was seen as the language for communication within the work environment.

Another study by Kaur et al. (2006) and Ong et al. (2011) also revealed that English is used for oral communication at the same Department, different department as well as with other companies. Within the same department, English was used for making/receiving phone calls, at the meetings, for holding press conferences and even for conducting research. Ong et al. (2011) also found that at the workplace, English, was used to communicate with employees, among colleagues, as well as to make negotiations with clients.

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## THEORETICAL FRMEWORK

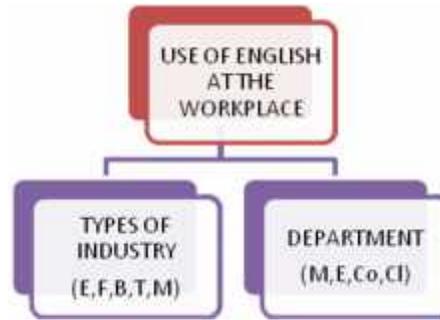


Figure 1-Theoretical framework of Study

Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework of the study. This study explores the use of English at the workplace based on (a) the types of industry and (b) the Department in the respective industries. The industries chosen for this study are Education, Food/Hotel/Tourism, Banking and Tourism. In addition to that, within each industry, the use of English may differ among Departments such as communication with the management, communication with the employees, communication with the colleagues and also communication with the clients or customers.

### TYPES OF INDUSTRY

Education  
Food/Hotel/Tourism  
Banking  
Tourism

### DEPARTMENT

Management  
Employees  
Colleagues  
Clients/Customers

## METHODOLOGY

This research design employs the descriptive analysis and statistical techniques to compare groups. To answer the research questions, analyses of mean score, t-test and one-way ANOVA are conducted according to the relevant requirement. Preliminary analyses such as exploring the normality of data and checking the reliability of a scale are also carried out.

The self-administered questionnaires were distributed as part of students' assignment in the course "English for Occupational Purposes". The assignment required students to find out how much English is used in different industries. Respondents were given approximately 20 to 30 minutes to answer all the questions. A total of 321 respondents completed the survey.

The survey instrument consists of two sections; section 1 is the respondent's profile and section 2 is the usage of English at the workplace. Profiling of the respondents gathers the information of gender, age, academic qualification, type of industry and department in the organization. There are four dimensions measuring English usage in the workplace; communication with the management, communication with employees, communication with colleagues, and communication with clients. The appropriate response is to be ticked based on a 3-point Likert scale of 1 (never), 2 (sometimes) and 3 (always).

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **Demographic Profile**

The findings reveal that the gender is split into almost equally half, with the males at 48.9% and the females at 50.8% and only one respondent (0.3%) is unaccounted for. For the range of age, the majority of 62.8% falls in the age range of 18 to 30 years old. Qualification of the participants goes to the degree holders at 34.3%, closely followed by the diploma holders at 32.7%. About half (50.8%) of the participants work in the food, hotel and tourism industry and the rest occupy the industry of banking, transportation, manufacturing, and education. Based on the department that the participants are currently attached to, the administration/management has the highest percentage of 38.9 and then followed by those in the customer service/marketing at 30.8%. In short, there is a high probability that the respondent is a female between 18 and 30 years old, has a bachelor degree and works in the industry of food, hotel and tourism.

### **Preliminary Analyses**

The tests on normality and reliability of Cronbach's Alpha were conducted to check the data goodness of measure. Normality of the distribution of scores is assessed by the values of Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic. The result suggests violation of the normality assumption of the four dimensions of communication against gender. According to Pallant (2005), this is quite common in a large sample.

The reliability coefficients of the four dimensions exhibit consistency; communication with management as measured by 8 items produce 0.820, communication with employees using 6 items yield a coefficient value of 0.87, communication with colleagues (4 items) has 0.797 and communication with clients (3 items) shows a coefficient of 0.800. The result of Alpha coefficients greater than 0.6 implies that the internal consistencies of the scales are met (Hair et al., 2006).

### Dimensions of Communication in English

To answer research question 1, the mean scores of the four dimensions of communication in English i.e. the management, employees, colleagues and clients, were computed. Table 1.1 shows that all the dimensions have the mean score of more than 2, whereby communication in English with the management has the highest score of 2.53. This finding is in accordance with the research by Isarji Sarudin, et al (2013), Kaur et al. (2006) and Ong et al. (2011) and they also found that English is the language of communication within the same department –especially for communication with the superiors.

TABLE 1  
Mean scores of the dimensions in communication

Dimension	Items	Mean score
Communication with	8	2.53
Communication with	6	2.21
Communication with	4	2.18
Communication with clients	3	2.48

### Communication in English and Gender

For research question 2, an independent-samples t-test is utilized to compare the mean scores for two groups of males and females, whether they differ significantly in terms of communication in English at their workplace. The t-test for equality of means reveals that the value of  $p$  is greater than 0.05 for all the four dimensions of communication, implying that there is no significant difference in the mean scores for males and females. In other words, men and women have the same level of communication in English at their workplace, be it with the management, employees, colleagues or clients.

## Communication in English and Type of Industry

To find out if the types of industry exhibit a significant difference in the communication of English, a one-way ANOVA analysis is used to compare the mean scores of the four dimensions across the six types of industry. The findings demonstrate that except for the dimension of communication with the clients, there is a significant difference among the mean scores of the other three dimensions for the type of industry. By analyzing the post-hoc test of multiple comparisons (refer to Table 2), the food/hotel/tourism, banking, transportation, and manufacturing industry against the education industry are found to be significantly different in terms of communication with their employees. In terms of communication with their colleagues, the banking and manufacturing industry against the education industry differ significantly.

TABLE 2  
 Post-hoc matrix for type of industry

Dimension	(I) Type of industry	(J) Type of industry	Mean difference (I -J)	Sig.
Communication with management	Education	Food/hotel/tourism	.52346*	.007
		Banking	.67083*	.001
		Transportation	.47083*	.046
		Manufacturing	.64775*	.001
Communication with colleagues	Education	Banking	.51250*	.032
		Manufacturing	.57500*	.011

\* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

## Communication in English and Department of an Organization

Since a typical organization has five departments, which constitute three or more groups, an analysis of one-way ANOVA is warranted. All the four dimensions are discovered to be statistically significantly different among their mean scores for the five departments ( $p$ -value < 0.05). Having presented a significant difference, the post-hoc analysis is consulted to show the exact differences among the departments. The results as shown in Table 3 present the department of marketing and operation against the administration department to differ significantly in terms of communication with management. In addition, the marketing and administration departments are found to be different in the communication with employees.

TABLE 3  
Post-hoc matrix for department in an organization

Dimension	(I) Department	(J) Department	Mean difference (I -J)	Sig.
Communication with management	Administration	Marketing	.26580*	.000
		Operation	.26600*	.007
Communication with employees	Administration	Marketing	.19322*	.018

\* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

## CONCLUSION

Figure 2 shows the summary of the use of English based on industries. This study reveals that all the five industries used English as a medium of communication within the workplace. Specifically, English is used more when communicating with the management, employees as well as with colleagues.



Figure 2 Summary of Use of English Based on Industries

Figure 3 is a summary of use of English among colleagues based on industry. This study reveals that English is commonly used among colleagues in the Banking, Manufacturing and Education.

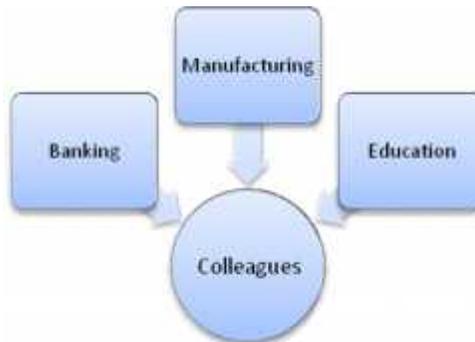


Figure 3 Summary of Use of English among Colleagues based on Industry

## **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The fact that English is not seen as medium of communication with clients indicates that as far as most industries in Malaysia is concerned, the mother tongue is still the preferred language. However, it is not surprising to find out that English is the lingua franca at the workplace-even in Malaysia. Institutions of higher learning need to ensure that their graduates entering the work force in Malaysia are ready to use English as a medium of communication. Measures must be taken so that graduating students are well equipped with oral communication skills, written skills, as well as presentation skills to prepare them for the work force.

## **THE AUTHORS**

Noor Hanim Rahmat obtained her Ph.D. in TESL and specializes in the teaching of writing. She is a senior lecturer and has taught for the past 22 years. She has taught Methodology of Teaching Writing, Academic Writing, Psycholinguistics, Sociolinguistics and English proficiency courses. Her research interests include writing methodology, sociolinguistics, as well as conversation analysis.

Normah Ismail is a Senior Lecturer of Academy of Language Studies at UiTM Johor Bahru. She has been teaching English for the past 25 years and has a Phd in Education. Her interest is English for specific purpose.

Azizah Daut is a Senior Lecturer of Business Management Faculty at UTM Johor Bahru .She has been teaching Economics and Management for the past 19 years and has a doctorate in Business Administration. Her interest is Human capital management

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