

# **Workplace English: An Analysis of Communication Needs**

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## **Abstract**

Malaysia is made up of approximately 62.57% or 5, 580,000 English speakers (EF Index, 2015). Being ex-British colony, English has become the second language, and it is most required for almost every individual and corporation. This language proficiency requirement has hence steered businesses to place primary importance on necessitating a strong grasp of the language among their employees through recruitment and selection or via retraining programmes. However, literature gleaned indicates that many English communication skills programmes are conducted without prior needs analysis of the communication skills. Thus, this study plans to first, identify the lacks, needs and wants of employees through survey method. Second, it intends to deliberate the appropriate training programmes needed to improve their communication skills. Finally, this study wishes to offer recommendations for Malaysian businesses in relation to the objectives above.

## **Keywords**

Communication Needs Analysis English Workplace

## **1. Introduction**

English is the most common language in the world although, in terms of the quantity of its native speaker, it is not the most extensive in numbers. According to the 2015 edition of Ethnologue, there are approximately 603,000,000 speakers of English as a second language. English is used daily despite not being the native language of the speakers. The importance of English is obvious from the number of L2 speakers worldwide as well as what it is used for. The world media use English to spread their news. Public and private businesses use English language to communicate even in some countries where it is a minority language or not a native language. In countries like Nigeria and Bangladesh that were colonized by British, their public sector still uses English as a medium of communication and by their citizen who mutually agree on a common communication channel. In Malaysia, although English is a second language, it is widely used among the private and government organizations. While there is a growing interest and trend into researching for the practical ways to improve employees' abilities in using English at workplace, there is absence of understanding to ensure the needs analysis for communication skills is to be conducted prior to engaging the employees with the training. To date, there is no needs analysis study that has been done in relation to communication skills among employees of businesses in Malaysia. Therefore, this study aims to identify the lacks, needs and wants of employees through survey method. Second, it aims to discuss the appropriate training programmes needed to improve their communication skills. Finally, this paper provides recommendations for Malaysian businesses in relation to the objectives above.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Needs Analysis of Lacks, Needs and Wants**

The ultimate reason behind exploring the needs analysis is to identify the lacks, needs and wants in English communicate skills and eventually seek solutions to these critical and expensive linguistic problems. Its significance enables Malaysian employees and businesses to improve staff performance and develop a competitive economic advantage in the global economy. Needs Analysis is employed in order to ascertain problems, to identify what is wanted and ways to solve the problems (Lawren et. al 1991). Johns (1991) stressed that the leading step in course design has to be the needs analysis, for it is the one that provides validity and relevancy for all subsequent course design activities. According to Santopietro and Peyton (1991), needs analysis can be carried out at any point of time be it at curriculum planning stage or at the end of a programme. However, Grant and Shank (1993) emphasized the necessity of needs analysis as the basis for developing curricula and training practice. This is due to their argument that when the employees' needs in learning English are not met, there is a big chance to result in attrition rate. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), needs can be divided into three categories which are necessities, lack and wants. What employees need to know so that they could perform at their workplace are necessities. The difference that exists between target proficiency and what the employees know are termed as lacks. Lastly, employees' subjective needs are known as wants.

### **2.2 Communication Skills**

Businesses in the 21st century are challenging. It is especially demanding for those operating worldwide businesses. As a result of that, in order for businesses to function and success in such complex environments, communication skill is an essential trait (Klaus, 2010; John, 2009; Timm, 2005; Maes, 1997). Research findings of Curtis (1998) revealed that "the skills most valued in the contemporary job-entry market are communication skills (including oral communication, listening, and written communication)." Hargie (1997) opined that for most lines of work the ability to communicate determines one's competency at work. Not only that, to be promoted and on top of the ladder, oral communication skills are the key (Lee, 2003; Crosling & Ward, 2001). In fact, employers unfailingly search for those with knack in oral communication, and they believed that the skills of listening, conversing and following instructions are to be the most central and most frequently used within their businesses (Maes, Weldy & Icengole, 1997). However, according to Jelphs (2006), both communication and or the lack of it have triggered many businesses related misfortunes and calamities that have taken place in recent years.

Looking at all the discussions above, obviously the needs analysis for communication skills at workplace enables employers and language training providers in Malaysian on how to best facilitate the employees in enhancing their ability to communicate fluently in English at their workplace through identification of their lacks, needs wants in English communication skills.

### **2.3 Research Objectives**

This study aims to identify and answer the following research questions:

- What are the lacks of the respondents in English communication skills?
- What are the needs of the respondents in English communication skills?
- What are the wants of the respondents in English communication skills?

## **3. Research Method**

The descriptive method is employed. Data analysis is based on SPSS version 21.

### **3.1 Research Design**

The quantitative research method is used in this study. Structured survey questionnaire is used to collect information by administering it to employees of various organizations. The mode of survey administration was through personal face to face questionnaire and Google survey form. This particular design was chosen on the basis that it will generally yield a highest cooperation and lowest refusal rate and high response quality. The questionnaire is designed to obtain the language lacks, needs and wants. The needs analysis was trimmed down to 4 parts. Part A is the biographical and working conditions; Part B is the information on the lacks in language skills. Part C is the needs to use English at the workplace, and Part D contains the kinds of training courses that the respondents want.

### **3.2 Population and Sample**

The population consists of higher management level from various industries with 50 sample size.

### **3.3 Data Collection Instrument and Procedures**

A survey questionnaire containing 4 main parts is used to measure the communication lacks, needs and wants of the employees. This paper survey questionnaire was administered to each employee using Google survey form.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Part A: Demographic and English Background**

Firstly, Part A of the questionnaire contains the demographic information and English background of the respondents. The information on age, gender, education, employment, profession, experience and working position are presented in Table 1. English Background is presented in Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 1. Demography

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Age</b>		
23-32 years old	15	30.0
33-42 years old	5	10.0
43-52 years old	29	58.0
53 and above	1	2.0
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	33	66.0
Female	17	34.0
<b>Education</b>		
Bachelors Degree	24	48.0
Diploma	1	2.0
Masters Degree	10	20.0
Professional Certificates	15	30.0
<b>Nature of employment</b>		
Business owner	1	2.0
Contract	5	10.0
Permanent	44	88.0
<b>Nature of profession</b>		
Administration	3	6.0
Broadcasting	1	2.0
Communication	1	2.0
Education	3	6.0
Engineering	18	36.0
Finance	6	12.0
General Management	8	16.0

Information Technology	3	6.0
Law	1	2.0
Legal	2	4.0
Plantation	1	2.0
Project Management	1	2.0
Telecommunications	1	2.0
Timber industry	1	2.0
<b>Working experience in current organization</b>		
above 20 years	10	20.0
below 10 years	27	54.0
between 10 and 20 years	13	26.0
<b>Working Position</b>		
Assistant General Manager	3	6.0
Department Manager	10	20.0
General Manager	13	26.0
Project Manager	14	28.0
Senior Manager	10	20.0

Table 1 shows that the majority (29, 58%) of the respondents are between the age 43 and 52. The other 15 (30%) of them are the youngest group aged between 23 and 32 years old. 5(10%) of them are between the age of 33 and 42. Only 1(2%) is above the age of 53. It also indicates that the majority (33, 66%) of the respondents are male. The rest (17, 34%) are female. It can also be observed that all are educated with 24 or 48% are degree holders, 15 or 30% are with professional certificates, 10 or 20% are with master's degree and only 1 or 2% is a diploma holder. There are 44 or 88% who are permanent employee at their organization, while the other 5 or 10% are on contract basis. Only one respondent is a business owner. It can be seen that the respondents are from various line of work. However, the majority (18, 36%) are from engineering industry. The other 8 or 16% are from general management. 6 respondents or 12% are from finance. It also indicates that the majority (27, 54%) have less than 10 years of working experience. The other 13 or 26% have between 10 and 20 years of experience. The rest (10, 20%) have more than 20 years of working experience. All of the respondents are holding managerial positions. Most (14, 28%) of them are project managers. The other 13 (26%) respondents are general managers. 10 or 20% are department and senior managers. Only 3(6%) are assistant general managers.

Table 2. English Experience and Usage

Categories	Frequency	Percent
<b>Experience in using English</b>		
above 20 years	32	64.0
between 10 to 20 years	14	28.0
less than 10 years	4	8.0
<b>On average, what level would you rate yourself on the usage of English at work?</b>		
1. Low level usage: Only a limited amount of English, and it is seldom used in the daily tasks.	3	6.0
2. Moderate level usage: English is used to communicate and interact within department.	21	42.0
3. Very heavy level usage: English is used in all organization's internal and external operations. All staff communicate and interact in English throughout and beyond the organization	26	52.0

Table 2 illustrates that the majority (32, 64%) of the respondents are with more than 20 years of experience in using English. The other 14 (28%) of the respondents have between 10 to 20 years of experience while another 4 (8%) respondents have less than 10 years' experience in using English. It can be seen from Table 2 that the usage of English at work for 52% (26) of the respondents is at a very heavy level. Even the other 21(42%) respondents indicated a moderate level of usage. Only 3 (6%) seldom use English in their daily tasks

Table 3. Ratings of English language skills

English language skills	Mean	Frequency (%)									
		Excellent		Very Good		Good		Satisfactory		Weak	
		F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1 Reading		14	28.0	23	46.0	10	20.0	2	4.0	1	2.0
2 Writing		8	16.0	23	46.0	14	28.0	5	10.0	0	0
3 Listening		15	30.0	21	42.0	11	22.0	2	4.0	1	2.0
4 Speaking		9	18.0	24	48.0	14	28.0	3	6.0	0	0

From Table 3, it can be observed that respondents rate themselves Very Good in all the skills. 48% rated themselves Very Good in speaking skill. 46% rated themselves as Very Good in both Reading and Writing skills while 42% rated themselves as Very Good in listening skill. Only 1 respondent rated himself as weak in reading skill and listening skill.

Table 4. Language skills used at work

English language skills	Mean	Frequency (%)									
		Always		Almost Always		Mostly Used		Rarely Used		Not At All	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1 Reading		25	50.0	13	26.0	9	18.0	2	4.0	1	2.0
2 Writing		26	52.0	12	24.0	9	18.0	3	6.0	0	0
3 Listening		18	36.0	20	40.0	8	16.0	4	8.0	0	0
4 Speaking		19	38.0	17	34.0	11	22.0	3	6.0	0	0

Table 4 shows that the majority of respondents Always use the skills of Reading (50%), Writing (52%) and Speaking (38%) at work. Only 1 respondent does not use reading skill at all at the workplace.

#### 4.2 Lacks

Secondly, Part B contains information on their lacks in terms of English language skills in their career. It is presented in Table 5, Table 6, Table 7 and Table 8.

Table 5. Lacks in Listening Skill

Categories	Frequency	Percent
1. Unfamiliar with the foreign accents and pronunciation	32	64.0
2. Incapable of translating the words or sentences	6	12.0
3. Unable to catch the words or conversations	13	26.0
4. Unable to understand slang, idiomatic expressions or colloquialisms	18	36.0
5. Unable to understand technical terms	14	28.0
6. Unable to remember the entire information	5	10.0
7. Others	1	2.0

Table 5 illustrates the percentage of the problems in listening skill. 64% of the respondents indicated that they are unfamiliar with the foreign accents and pronunciation. 36% stated that they are unable to understand slang, idiomatic expressions or colloquialisms. 28% pointed out that they are unable to understand technical terms. 26% are unable to catch the words or conversations. Another 12% are incapable of translating the words or sentences. The remaining 10% are unable to remember the entire information during listening.

Table 6. Lacks in Speaking Skill

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1. Unable to pronounce accurately	21	42.0
2. Unable to speak with correct grammar	25	50.0
3. Unable to choose the right words	19	38.0
4. Nervous when speaking English	11	22.0
5. Unable to present the information in the correct sequence	14	28.0
6. None	1	2.0

Table 6 shows the problems in speaking skills. The respondents admitted that the inability to speak with correct grammar is their most critical problem (50%) in speaking skill. The inability to pronounce accurately (42%) is the next critical problem in speaking skill. The inability to choose the right words (38%) rated the third problem in speaking skill. The inability to present information in the correct sequence rank (28%) ranked the next place. The nervousness when speaking English (22%) is the least problem in speaking.

Table 7. Lacks in Reading Skill

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1. Unable to understand words, technical terms, slang, idiomatic expression or colloquialisms	31	62.0
2. Unable to understand complicated messages	12	24.0
3. Unable to understand due to the grammatical weakness	7	14.0
4. Unable to understand various meaning of words or idioms	10	20.0
5. Others	0	0

Table 7 specifies that the inability to understand words, technical terms, slang, idiomatic expression or colloquialisms is the problem faced most (62%) in reading skill. The inability to understand complicated messages is the second mostly faced problem (24%) in reading skill. Inability to understand various meaning of words or idioms ranked the third problem (20%) while inability to understand due to the grammatical weakness is rated the least problem (14%).

Table 8. Lacks in Writing Skill

Categories	Frequency	Percent
1. Unable to use the right words or idiomatic expressions	22	44.0
2. Unable to convey the messages according to the intention	7	14.0
3. Unable to compose the sentences according to the intention	15	30.0
4. Unable to use the correct writing format	2	4.0
5. Unable to use the correct grammar	19	38.0
6. Others	2	4.0

Table 8 indicates that the inability to use the right words or idiomatic expressions is the problem faced most (44%) in writing skill. This is followed by their inability to use the correct grammar in writing (38%), compose the sentences according to the intention (30%), convey the messages according to the intention (14%) and use correct writing format (4%).

### 4.3 Needs

Thirdly, Part C contains information on their needs in terms of English language skills in their career.

Table 9. Language Needs

English language skills	Frequency (%)									
	Most Necessary		Very Necessary		Moderately Necessary		Slightly Necessary		Least Necessary	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1 Reading	28	56.0	13	26.0	7	14.0	1	2.0	1	2.0
2 Writing	31	62.0	10	20.0	6	12.0	3	6.0	-	-
3 Listening	28	56.0	10	20.0	10	20.0	2	4.0	-	-
4 Speaking	27	54.0	15	30.0	7	14.0	1	2.0	-	-
5 Answering the phone in English	25	50.0	12	24.0	8	16.0	4	8.0	1	2.0
6 Sending emails in English	33	66.0	9	18.0	6	12.0	2	4.0	-	-
7 Drafting letters in English	28	56.0	14	28.0	6	12.0	2	4.0	-	-
8 Writing reports in English	29	58.0	11	22.0	9	18.0	1	2.0	-	-
9 Meeting in English	26	52.0	13	26.0	8	16.0	3	6.0	-	-
10 Talking with customers in English	26	52.0	12	24.0	10	20.0	1	2.0	1	2.0

In terms of skills that are needed in the workplace, writing skill is the most needed (62%) skill of all. Sending emails in English (66%), writing reports in English (58%) and drafting letters in English (56%) are among the skills highly needed in their career. Table 9 also indicates that speaking skill is least needed (54%) compared to other skills. Answering phone in English is the least needed skill (50%).



#### **4.4 Wants**

Finally, Part D contains information on their wants in terms of English language skills in their career.

Table 10. Language Wants

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1. Get new information	10	20.0
2. Improve my English writing skills	19	38.0
3. Improve my English reading skills	13	26.0
4. Improve my English listening skills	17	34.0
5. Improve my English speaking skills	23	46.0
6. Allow me to learn English grammar	18	36.0
7. Improve my English pronunciation	19	38.0
8. Increase my English vocabulary and technical terms	25	50.0

According to Table 10, 50% of the respondents want to increase their English vocabulary and technical terms. 46% want to improve their English speaking skills. 38% want to improve their English writing skills and pronunciation. The other 36% wishes to be allowed to learn English grammar. Another 34% want to improve their English listening skill. 26% want to improve reading skill, and the remaining 20% want to get new information.

#### **5. Discussion**

This study examined three major concerns of needs analysis of English communication at workplace, which are lacks, needs and wants. Results revealed that the lacks in the English language skills and the necessities to use these skills in workplace have resulted in the identification of the specific communication skills that they want in order to improve their inadequacies.

Firstly, their lacks in language skills are pointed out in specific areas. In listening and reading, the lack is mainly at being unfamiliar with the foreign accents and pronunciation, unable to understand slang, idiomatic expressions or colloquialisms and technical terms. Being in the middle and top management levels in companies operating locally and involved in both domestic and international businesses require the respondents to deal and communicate with stakeholders and peers from various countries and cultural background. Thus, the respondents noticed that they face these difficulties during the listening process. In speaking, they lack the ability to pronounce accurately, to speak with correct grammar and to choose the right words. In writing, the respondents are unable to use the right words or idiomatic expressions, to use the correct grammar and to compose the sentences according to the intention. As a result of not being sure about the the pronunciation and grammar, they can often be slowed down or made uncertain during writing and speaking.

Secondly, being in the managerial level requires the respondents to heavily use English in their workplace. They need English mainly to write emails, reports and drafting letters. For that reason, sound writing skills are essential, for all the managerial communiqué still ends up on paper. They put proposals, discussions, ideas and decisions in writing. In comparison to writing, speaking skill is not much needed especially in answering telephone since the respondents are of the higher managerial level.

Finally, the respondents decided that improving vocabulary and technical terms is their priority. By learning vocabulary, it will enhance their grasp of commonly-used business idioms, technical terms and abbreviations. They also want to improve their speaking skill and pronunciation. This can be done through listening skill because listening will familiarize them with new words and acquire the correct pronunciation and usage. Improving writing and grammar is another aim of the respondents. By improving writing, they will develop very careful structuring of language and grammar where their sentences will be kept simple, short and concise yet meaningful and impactful.

## **6. Recommendations and Conclusion**

As for the programmes needed to improve the English communication skills at workplace, businesses in Malaysia should carefully conduct communication needs analysis for their employees prior to conducting the programme. This is due to the fact that every factor like age, education, working experience, position, English usage and experience do influence the type of training programme and its success. Once the needs analysis is conducted, the training programme can be developed to cater for the specific needs of the employees at the appropriate language level, skill, content and environment; thus, this enables them to perform work related tasks successfully while enhancing their businesses. This will curb the wastage of fund and resources, the mismatch in curriculum development, incompatibility of teaching material or clashes of teaching methods.

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## **Biography**

**Tengku Shahraniza** graduated from University Kebangsaan Malaysia with a Bachelor of Education (Hons) in TESL and obtained her Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Multimedia University. She possesses more than 20 years of teaching and training experiences. She taught English courses for foundation, pre-diploma and diploma in colleges, matriculation centre and universities. She is the advisor for Arabic Culture Society and has been teaching international students from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Sudan, Nigeria, Botswana, Kazakhstan, Iran, Iraq, Tanzania, Japan, Korea and Thailand. She has been conducting corporate courses on English Language, Customer Service, Report Writing, Business Communication, Presentation Skills, Grooming, Ethics and Protocol for clients like Nestle, Bursa Kuala Lumpur, Felda, Sime Darby, Guthrie, Golden Hope Plantations, Malaysian Palm Oil Board, United Engineers Malaysia, AZRB, Kontena National, Telekom, Tenaga Nasional, Royal Malaysian Police, Risda, Royal Malaysian Navy, Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation, JTM, Ministry of Higher Education, MATRADE, Airod and APR. She loves doing research with special interest in ESP, Technical and Business Communication, Management and Aviation. She has been the judge for RHB NST SPELL IT RIGHT CHALLENGE for 7 years. She also published papers in highly reputable peer-reviewed open-access international conferences and journals listed in Scopus, ISI and Corpenicus.