

Barriers to Effective Communication at the Workplace

Farzana Jelani¹, Nur Sabrina Nordin²

1. Academy of Language Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam
farzaine@gmail.com
2. Academy of Language Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam
sabrina.nordin08@gmail.com

Abstract

Working environment communication is fundamental to cooperation. In addition to the fact that it builds and look after connections, work environment communication encourages development. However, the barriers in communication can be a hindrance to information being communicated successfully. This study aims to study the communication issues that are faced by Malaysian employees in the workplace. A questionnaire was developed and distributed to Malaysian workers that comprised of various departments in Malaysia. The questionnaire comprises of questions on the communication problems in the context of the workplace in terms of language barrier and physical environment. The participants that had contributed to this study were as much as 41 respondents. The respondents involved had assessed the survey based on their personal experiences in their respective organizations. Based on the results of the study, it can be seen on how the language barrier and physical environment of the workplace affects the employees' conditions. The findings of this study can help employers view these challenges more seriously and consider the possible solutions to the problems that have been discussed. This paper is concluded by providing future researchers recommendations on various communication problems in the workplace to be further investigated and analysed in a more comprehensive manner.

Keywords: *Organizational Communication, Language Barrier, Physical Environment, Code Switching, Acoustic Sound*

Introduction

Background of Issue

The beginning of the universe is the derivation of communications. There was no beginning which was without communication. Just like that, communication encourages the revolution of the human culture. Communication is an all-round wonder that implies diverse things to various individuals. It is a channel of a means for access to the psyche or thought of another. Likewise, for organization and human as social being, communication has its own significance, regardless of whether pros or cons are an indivisible bit of life and also it has crucial part on all activities aimed at gaining organizational goals.

According to Duncan and Moriarty (as cited in Asamu, 2014), communication is the human activity that joins individuals together and form relationship. In the context of the workplace, Price (as cited in Ayatse & Ikyanyon, 2012) characterized organizational communication as how much data about the activity is transmitted by an organization to its individuals and among individuals from the organization. This implies that people relate with one another by medium of communication. Chen et al. (2005) demonstrated that workplace communication gathers the employees together as one in a corporation. It is the rope that ties individuals together in an organization. However, some factors might result in the emergence of the communication issues at the workplace.

Objective of Study

The broad objective of this study is to identify the communication issues at the workplace. As the problems faced in communication vary based on the workplace environment, the scope has been designated to cover specific issues. The specific objectives are:

- I. To study whether language barrier affect communication at the workplace.
- II. To study whether physical and environmental barriers affect communication at the workplace.

Research Questions

The research questions in this study cover the scope that is intended to be investigated. The researchers aimed to study two aspects. The following questions are the research questions developed for the present study.

- I. How does language barrier affect communication at the workplace?
- II. How do physical and environmental barriers affect communication at the workplace?

Problem Statement

It is essential in a nation like Malaysia which tries to accomplish the status of developed country by 2020, to have individuals who can convey successfully so as to contend on the worldwide stage (Gill, 2002). Successful correspondence is not just about a matter of trading data. It is likewise alluding to the understanding and tolerating the feeling and implications that lies behind the data (Daud et al., 2017). An organization where great correspondence is rehearsed will in general be extremely profitable. On the other side, terrible correspondence can have some deplorable ramifications for your organization.

There are numerous obstructions to communication that exist in any organization, however some are more inescapable and more typical than others. Successful organizations depend on powerful correspondence for more prominent proficiency and collaboration. Terrible or negative correspondence that exists in the work environment can cause numerous effects, for example, authoritative dispute. By understanding the impacts of negative correspondence in the working environment, you can create strategies that assistance to diminish the issue and support positive correspondence.

In any case, there are not really any distributed works done in the Malaysian setting investigating correspondence hindrances (Bhar, Bakar and Chua, 2012). The vast majority of the investigations with respect to this issue have been led generally in different nations. Along these lines, this study intends to research the communication issues in the work environment in the Malaysian.

Significance of Study

This study sheds light on the common issues that take place in the working environment. The researchers intended to address how these issues can influence not only the workers and employers, but also the organization's state in the future. According to Bhar, Bakar and Chua (2012), the researchers indicated that there are still insufficient studies that covered the issues of communication in the organization in Malaysia. Therefore, there exists a gap that is in need to be filled with current findings. The results of the present study will assist the top management in viewing how these issues more seriously and take into their hands to solve them in the suitable manner.

Literature Review

Communication is a procedure that contains expressing, listening and understanding (Banerji and Dayal, 2005). Communication covers all activities that an individual does when he wants to make a change in someone else's mind. This is a meaning bridge between an individual or people and organization. Communication is vital for an organization. It is the lifeblood of an organization. Each individual in an organization needs to communicate among each other. Hence, without workplace communication, nothing will be accomplished in a matter of time. However, communication barriers can pop-up at any stage of the communication process and have the potential to create misunderstanding and confusions. This section discussed the types of communication issues that occur in the workplace followed by past studies that have covered these issues.

Types of Issues in the Workplace

Language Barrier

Language is a very important tool in conveying information, feelings, messages and many more. Individuals that master a particular language can grasp the essence of effective communication. The fluency of one's language can really have an impact how one will send or receive a certain message. The existence of a hurdle in the communication channel can be caused by the lack of the mastery of the particular language used. This situation can happen in any environment including the workplace, where communication is vital to the success of its tasks and goals. Thus, issues such as language barriers can hinder effective communication and cause many unnecessary problems to arise due to misunderstanding.

Language barrier is a type of communication issues that can potentially be present in the workplace especially when there are more languages used by the workers aside from the official language used at the workplace. This issue can unmistakably be seen when a representative attempts to impart to alternate workers and the data isn't conveyed as the other gathering cannot comprehend and appreciate the words that are utilized by the sender (Daud et al., 2017). Feely and Harzing (2008) stated that regardless of whether the directors being referred to are generally able in the dialect of the other party, loss of logical skills are constantly present as the utilization of cleverness, imagery, affectability, arrangement, influence, and inspiration requires a great state of awareness and expertise. In language barriers, the components that could cause incapable communication incorporate 1) speed of talking, 2) diverse dialect competency, and 3) utilization of jargon (specialized terms) and abbreviation (Daud et al., 2017). Ramesh and Tiwana (as cited in Daud et al., 2017) expressed that in corporate associations in Malaysia,

communication hindrances also exist since representatives utilize certain terms that are most certainly not unmistakable, bringing about disappointment for a message to be conveyed and even miscommunication. However, the common circumstance that happens due to the existence of language barrier is code switching. Code switching tends to usually happen among second language users in the workplace. This suggestive significance refers to the dialect that is debased, unsystematic, and has components of foreign languages in Bahasa Melayu (Muthusamy, 2010). During meetings between the parent company with its subsidiaries, the employees of second language users would gather together among their group in order to get a clearer understanding of what is currently being discussed before proceeding to another issue (Feely & Harzing, 2008). Such situation may cause a delay to the decision making process of the company. The study by Bhar, Bakar and Chua (2012) revealed that 64.5% of the respondents partially agreed that socio-cultural barriers do affect their ability to communicate with their bosses, 77.7% believed that socio-cultural backgrounds have direct effect over their communication skills, 53.2% faced problems in using the correct grammar in formal communications such as in writing formal documents or during presentations and 40.3% partially agreed that they found it challenging to choose the right level of formality when communicating internally or externally. The socio-cultural barriers were highly agreed upon as an issue as it restrains effective communication as English as a Second Language (ESL) employees tend to use words that are unfamiliar to those who are not within their cultural circle. As this issue continues to linger within the operations of the workplace, it may impact the organization negatively. Thus, the existence of language barrier in organizations can cause workers to feel uncertain and anxious due to the miscommunications that occur (Feely & Harzing, 2008).

Physical and Environmental Barriers

Communication is vital for an organization. It is the lifeblood of an organization and without it, things will not get done. Hence, without workplace communication, nothing will be accomplished in a matter of time. Generally, communication becomes ineffective due to barriers. As such, physical environment barrier. As communication is a process of sending and receiving messages between sender and receiver, through the process, physical environment such as noise can disturb the communication process. Thus, issues such as physical environment barrier can disrupt the communication process in the workplace.

The Shannon's Model or Shannon-Weaver Model is a model of communication that consist of five basic components. The components are information source, transmitter, receiver, destination as well as noise source according to Shannon & Weaver (as cited in Fedaghi, Alsaqa, & Fadel, 2009). Not all barriers in communication caused by people. Physical environment barrier may be one of the source of ineffectiveness in communication process. Messages can really be obstructed by natural and physical factors, for example, the physical setting and the circumstance where the communication happens for instance. A study done by various researchers indicated that lighting, acoustic environment, humidity and temperature are the factors that play a role in communication. (Stans, Dalemans, de Witte, Smeets, & Beurskens, 2017) The study revealed that, lighting was described as having an influence on communication. Both the type of light and the position of lighting were considered important. Barriers mentioned were poor lighting, compromised light and standing in front of a light source. Acoustic environment stated that noisy environments were rated as one of the most important environmental barriers to communication by patients and nurse. Humidity and temperature on the other hand, depicts that temperature changes, environmental irritants in the air and humidity can be barriers for people who are communication vulnerable.

Past Research of Communication Issues in the Workplace

Language Barrier in IT Industry

The study by Bar, Nor and Chua (2012) investigates the ubiquity of language barrier in the workplace and to what extent the IT executives' face language problems in the workplace. The method used in the study is quantitative and the researcher had received feedback from a total of 62 respondents. The findings of the study revealed that 64.5% of the respondents partially agreed that socio-cultural barriers do affect their ability to communicate with their bosses, 77.7% believed that socio-cultural backgrounds have direct effect over their communication skills, 53.2% faced problems in using the correct grammar in formal communications such as in writing formal documents or during presentations and 40.3% partially agreed that they found it challenging to choose the right level of formality when communicating internally or externally. The socio-cultural barriers were highly agreed upon to be seen as an issue as it restrains effective communication as English as a Second Language (ESL) employees tend to use words that are unfamiliar to those who are not within their cultural circle. Thus, this study shows that language barriers can prevent successful communication within an organization.

Physical Environment Barrier in Health-Care Industry

A study done by various researchers stated that there few factors in physical environment that play a role in communication during conversations between people who are communication vulnerable and health-care professionals. A scoping review was conducted to provide an extensive overview related to factors in the physical environment that play a role in communication during conversations between people who are communication vulnerable and health-care professionals. A total of 16 publications were included as sample of the study. As stated by Stans, Dalemans, de Witte, Smeets, & Beurskens (2017), the factors in the physical environment are lighting, acoustic environment, humidity and temperature.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design adopted for this study was descriptive survey method. This is on the grounds that the strategy was considered suitable, as this study involves acquiring data about one or more groups of people on communication issues in the workplace by asking a series of questions and drawing inferences from the responses of the sample. According to Oniye (as cited in Asamu, 2014), descriptive surveys deals with systematic description of an event in a very factual and accurate manner.

Population and Sample

According to Abdullah and Ahmad (2016), the population refers to all units that are the object of the study. In this study, the non-probability method is chosen in determining the respondents of this research study. The sampling technique chosen for this study is the purposive method. In this method, there are often some criteria to be met and every unit that meets the criteria is selected (Abdullah and Ahmad, 2016). The target respondents in this study are the working individuals. The specific area had been chosen as the potential respondents fit the criteria set by the researcher.

Instrument

The present study aims to explore the communication in the workplace. The questionnaire employed was divided into three sections; Section A, Section B and Section C. Section A comprises of the demographic aspects of each respondents. However, Section B and Section C are the likert-scale based questions. The respondents were required to choose from a five-point scale describing the prevalence of the encounters. The responses are range from 1 (Always) to 5 (Never). The construct of measuring these issues differ based on the individuals' experiences, therefore, the five-point scale is used in this study. The frequency study was orchestrated to understand how commonly the employees in Malaysia face such circumstances.

Method of Data Collection

For this study, the researchers utilized the survey administration application from Google known as Google Form. Google Form was chosen as it helps the researchers to acquire respondents at a short time due to the reason that the form can be distributed via Whatsapp application.

Method of Data Analysis

For each section in the designated questionnaire, the data were analysed using percentages and frequency counts. The responses from each respondent will be tabulated and the researchers will analysed whether each responses were answering the research questions of this study.

Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, the researchers explain the results and discussion of the findings from the quantitative study that was conducted through the distribution of questionnaire. The findings will begin with the elaboration of the demographic profile of the respondents in Section A of the questionnaire followed by the results for Section B; Language Barrier that comprises of two sub-sections which Code Switching and Jargon. Next, Section C; Physical Environment is explained in two sub-sections as well which are Acoustic Sound and Temperature. Furthermore, the findings of the study will be supported by prior researches that had covered the field of study.

Answer to Research Question 1

How does language barrier affect communication in the workplace?

The question above comprises of two sub-sections. Therefore, the elaboration is written according to the respective category. The bar chart below is the results of the language barrier section.

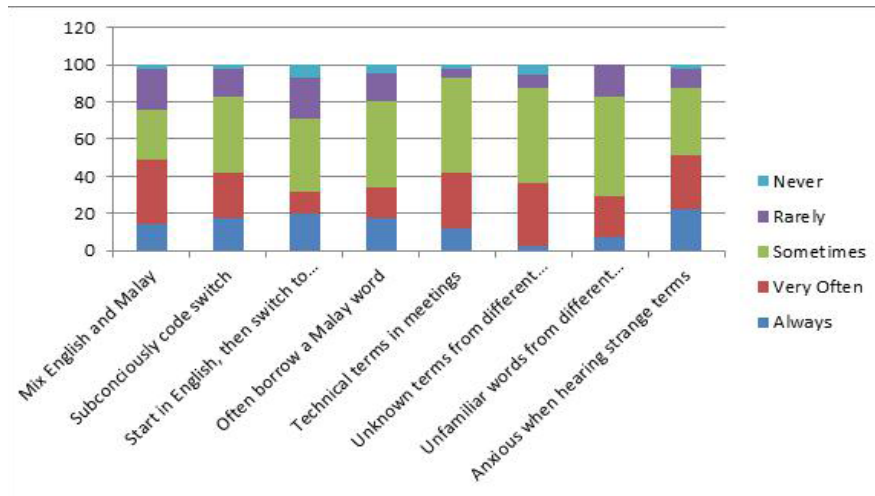


Figure 1

The first sub-section addressed is code switching. Based on Figure 1, about 14 (34.1%) of respondents comprised of the majority that tend to mix the English and Malay language when speaking. Only one respondent at 2.4% was reported to never mix the two languages while interacting with others. Furthermore, 17 (41.5%) of respondents sometimes subconsciously code switch from English to Malay in conversations. Similarly, only one respondent replied to never do so at 2.4%. Next, the respondents answered the statement about starting a sentence in English and then switch to speaking Malay. About 16 (39%) of respondents answered sometimes. However, fewer respondents replied never at 7.3%. Moreover, the most respondents that often borrows a Malay word while speaking in English at 46.3% sometimes do so while only 2 (4.9%) of respondents were reported to never do it. In a previous study by Feely and Harzing (2008), the authors demonstrated that employees with different cultural backgrounds to subconsciously code switch during meetings. They would huddle together and discuss in their native language as they feel more comfortable that way. Thus, this supports the notion that employees who are second language users subconsciously code switch when communicating with others. Simultaneously, this study supports the notion that employees tend to mix between their native language and the second language at times. Moreover, this study found that the Malaysian employees tend to begin their sentences in English, however, switch to Malay in their conversations.

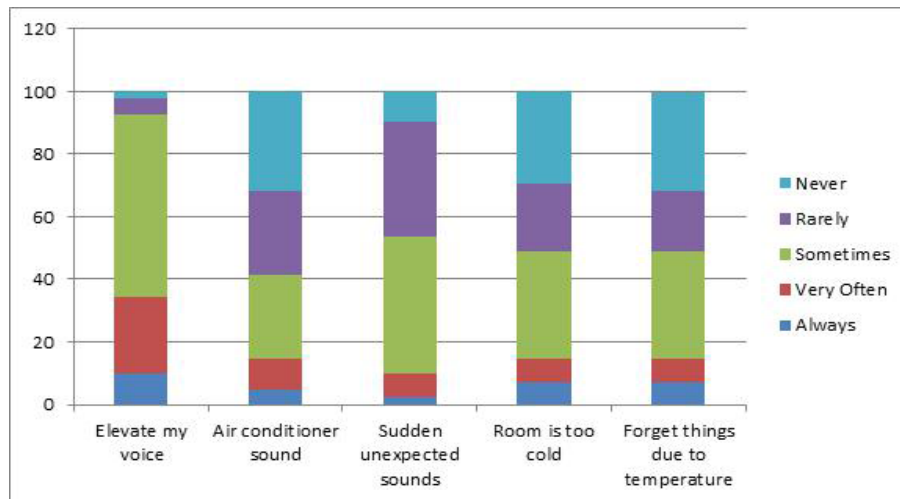
The next sub-section is jargon. Figure 1 also portrays the bar chart for the findings on the jargon section that falls under language barrier. It is common to hear technical terms during meetings, especially when an uncommon issue is being discussed. More than half of the respondents at 51.2% state that they sometimes face such situations during meetings. However, there are respondents that report to have never heard such terms at 2.4%. Next, different departments are usually comfortable using certain terms among their staffs as it is within their knowledge and skills. About 51.2% reported to sometimes hear unknown terms when they are communicating with employees from other departments. An answer from a respondent replied to always face this situation at the workplace. Furthermore, companies with multicultural employees usually face language barrier issues as they come from various backgrounds. About 53.7% reported to face this situation sometimes at the workplace whereas 7.3% reported to always face this occurrence on a regular basis. Lastly, it is common to feel anxious when a strange term is heard as it may inhibit effective communication. 36.6% sometimes feel worried when this happens meanwhile, 2.4% disagreed as they never felt such way in that type of situation. Next, these findings were supported by prior researches. According to Feely and Harzing (2008), the researchers reported that it is common to hear unfamiliar terms during meetings. However, this situation is mostly faced by the English as a Second Language (ESL) employees. This situation may happen when they are not proficient in English, thus causing them not comprehend it at times. This is also supported by Daud et al. (2017) that demonstrated jargon to be a barrier to successful communication. Moreover, various cultural background may be a factor to this issue as common words may be used but misheard

due to their distinct accents or their unique way of pronouncing words (Bhar, Bakar and Chua, 2012). Furthermore, Feely and Harzing (2008) demonstrated that individuals tend to feel worried when they face problems in comprehending one's speech.

Research Question 2

How does physical environment affect communication in the workplace?

The question above comprises of two sub-sections. Therefore, the elaboration is written according to the respective category. The bar chart below is the results of the physical environment section.



The first sub-section discussed is acoustic sound. Based on Figure 2, about 24 (58.5%) of respondents need to elevate their voice sometimes when talking with their colleague due to the background sound in the room while 1 (2.4%) of the respondent never has the need to elevate their voice when communicating with his colleague. In addition to that, about 13 (31.7%) of respondents reported to never experienced the issue of the air conditioning sound as disturbing when communicating with their colleagues. Yet, 2 (4.9%) of the respondents answered that the sound of air conditioning is quite disturbing when communicating with their colleague. Furthermore, unexpected sounds can be quite bothersome for some people. From this chart, about 18 (43.9%) of the respondents reported to experience this situation sometimes at the workplace though 1 (2.4%) of the respondent reported that he or she always face this situation at the workplace. As stated in a study done by Stans, Dalemans, de Witte, Smeets, & Beurskens (2017), there are a few factors in physical environment that play a role in communication barrier. Acoustic environment was identified as one of the influencer. This study can be supported with the Shannon's Model. According to Shannon & Weaver (as cited in Fedaghi, Alsaqa, & Fadel, 2009), when the channel that brought the messages from the speaker to the hearer were blocked with a noise source, communication barrier was bound to happen. Simultaneously, this study support the notion that acoustic environment can be one of the physical environment that causes ineffectiveness in communication process at the workplace.

Next, this section discussed on temperature. According to Figure 2, the temperature of the room may causes difficulties for an individual to speak. About 14 (34.1%) of the respondents agreed that sometimes they have difficulties when talking to their colleagues due to the temperature of the room is too cold. Also, about 3 (7.3%) of the respondents agreed that they always have difficulties in terms of talking when the temperature of the room is too cold along with an additional 3 (7.3%) of the respondents reported to very often have similar difficulties as the others. Besides, some people may forget the things that they wanted to deliver to others if the room is too cold or vice versa. About 14 (34.1%) of the respondents agreed that sometimes they tend to forget the details that they wanted to talk due to the room temperature is too cold or hot. On top of that, about 3 (7.3%) of the respondents agreed that they tend to always forget the things that they wanted to talk along with an additional 3 (7.3%) of the respondents reported to very often have similar difficulties due to the room temperature is too cold or the other way around. Based on the study done by Stans, Dalemans, de Witte, Smeets, & Beurskens (2017), temperature was identified as one of the element that affect the communication process of an individual. The temperature was known as the noise source that block the channel of communication between the speaker and hearer during communication. This study can be supported with the Shannon's Model. According to Shannon & Weaver (as cited in Fedaghi, Alsaqa, & Fadel, 2009), when the channel that brought the messages from the speaker to the hearer were blocked with a noise source, communication barrier was bound to happen. Concurrently, the theory above as well as the studies had done by previous researchers support the notion that temperature as one of the physical environment that causes ineffectiveness in communication process at the workplace.

Discussions

Conclusion

Overall, from the previous chapter, the researchers discovered that respondents agreed that both language barrier and physical environment barrier are a problem to effective communication. In terms of language barrier, both code switching and jargon received responses from the participants that indicate these two barriers cause a problem in engaging in daily communications at the workplace. As most respondents answered "Sometimes" quite commonly as to another option, "Rarely", this shows that the situations asked do have an impact on the respondents in the workplace communication. As an example from this study, the majority of participants agreed that they feel anxious when they do not comprehend unfamiliar terms in communicating with another individual. Thus, this proves that these communication barriers causes communication breakdown at the workplace.

However, for the physical environment, not all respondents view that physical obstacles as one of the major barriers in communication as only a selected number of respondents that experienced physical environment barrier as an issue to effective communication. Acoustic sound is viewed to be an obstacle to a certain point as it may cause individuals to be distracted in communication when a sudden nearby sound interrupts their attention. But, temperature wise, based on the results from this study, not many participants view temperature as a hindrance to successful communication. The findings show that it may be an issue, but not seen as a major one compared to the other factors studied.

There are several implications that can be derived from this study. These findings indicate that employers should take these problems that occur in the workplace seriously. This is due to the fact communication is a crucial factor that can affect the organization's success or failure as it involves the intellectual assets of the organization. Therefore, effective communication would not only bring benefit to the employees, but this includes the superiors and the organization as a whole. In order to achieve this positive state in the workplace, a few a recommendations are given.

First of all, the management should feature key issues and pinpoint basic zones for improvement. It is known those attitudes that exist and the degree of communication breakdowns, which feature the issues that should be tackled. Propelled insights enable us to realize where to begin to have the most effect or enhance an explicit result. This enables associations to focus on the most basic zones to address – regardless of whether it’s an explicit characteristic, for example, convenience or peak, or an open door, for example, how administrators convey information– enabling the organization to be progressively prescriptive and show signs of improvement results quicker.

Secondly, exhibit responsibility to change. If the organization is determined about enhancing communication in the workplace, the demonstration of measuring is an image of progress, and it will be esteemed by workers. Be that as it may, be careful with estimating without the promise to finish - to be compelling in supporting change, the employers have to accomplish something with the information to demonstrate advance.

Lastly, evaluate current internal communication system. It is difficult to enhance something that is not known to bring down the organization. When arranging future communication ventures, the management should evaluate the present techniques, procedures and innovation to decide whether they require updating. It is also important to review past input and representative studies to pass judgment on what specialized strategies are functioning admirably or not all that well. This approach can help figure out what the present communication technique is missing of. A recommendation for development is to create a comprehensive record of what should be implemented to enhance your worker communication challenges. Afterward, establish the foundation for making noteworthy arrangements and what should be covered in the “planning” meeting.

Suggestions for Future Research

For those who have the intention to do the same study, the researchers recommend to further highlight the communication issues at the workplace, more barriers should be taken into consideration other than choosing language and physical environment barrier. As a suggestion, future researcher might want to identify if channel barrier or cultural barrier do affect the communication at the workplace. Besides, future researcher may replicate this present study by incorporating more variables in order to have a more comprehensive study. Future researchers are recommended to include more obstacles that cause ineffective communication at the workplace yet still maintaining the previous variables that had been discussed in this study. By incorporating more variables, future researcher can discovered which barriers disrupt the most on communication at the workplace.

Acknowledgements

It was a challenging task for us in completing this research. But, we are very fortunate that we had the help from many parties who had made this challenging task a success. All parties involved in the completion of this research had kept us motivated during our ups and downs.

We would like to express our thousands gratitude to our beloved supervisor, Dr. Hanim, who had taught us many things about conducting a research. She also always gave motivation to us when we are lost doing research. We learnt many things from her and the obvious one is, not everything will go as we plan. Sometimes, something will happen that making our task delayed. However, with the guidance of Dr. Hanim, we feel continuously motivated and gain even more drive to finish this research. Thank you for the support, idea and patience in assisting us with this project.

Finally, this paper is also dedicated to our one and only family for the motivation and positive vibes that they give to us. This piece of success is dedicated only for my heroes of our lives, both of our parents. Alhamdulillah, I would like to thank God Almighty, because without the blessings from Him, we would not have successfully completed this study.

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