

A Needs Analysis on the Demands of Malaysian Industries for Spoken English Communication Skill at the Workplace - A Concept Paper

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Abstract

English Spoken Communication (ESC) is a skill that is very much needed at the workplace in Malaysia. It's a skill that is currently required of our graduates in most local businesses. This concept paper seeks to propose a qualitative phenomenological research study which employs semi-structured interviews in conducting a needs analysis involving local industries, and undergraduates, specifically interns, with regards to their demands on the ESC skills needed from our local undergraduates upon graduation. At the present, most academic papers published on needs analyses in Malaysia are inclined to a quantitative approach or of a mixed-method approach which are heavier on the quantitative aspect which is aimed at a specific industry only. There is a scarcity of research employing a full qualitative approach on the needs analysis which focuses on multiple industries. This concept paper aims to bridge that gap and help to identify the relevant ESC skills needed in a Malaysian workplace, the usability of said skills, and the expectations of future graduates with regards to ESC. The proposed method of analysis will be thematic analysis, codifying and organising the data in order for a conclusion to be drawn. It is hoped that with this concept paper, a clearer picture on the English language needs relative to the Malaysian tertiary education can be addressed.

Keywords: *Needs Analysis, Spoken English, Workplace Communication Skills, Malaysian Industrial Demands*

1. Background of the study

Researchers have been looking for an answer to question whether men and women lead in the same way for In a workplace, the ability to communicate effectively either verbally or nonverbally is highly crucial to ensure a good working environment and workflow within an organisation. Effective communication, especially verbal communication among employees and employers will help to create dynamic and positive relationships among each other, which could lead to positive outcomes in a given task or project. In Malaysia, the English language is heralded as a second language after the official language, which is Bahasa Melayu. A lot of organisations, companies, and industries choose to use English language for business and occupational purposes (Jageer Singh & Raja Harun, 2020). This form of communication occurs both internally within employees, and externally with clients or stakeholders.

There has been a growing concern among employers in Malaysia of the university graduates' ability to use the English Spoken Communication (ESC) skills in the workplace. It was reported that the graduates looking for job opportunities were not proficient enough in English language which was one of the main reasons for them not being employed by various organisations (Dass, 2013; Hossain et al., 2018; Ting et al., 2017). This is worrying since students in Malaysia go through 11 years of schooling (primary and secondary schools), and the teaching and learning of English language is also emphasised in the tertiary education. Fur-

thermore, Malaysian industries are growing more inclined in adapting the English language as a form of communication, even with Malaysian clients. As Malaysia has an increasing number of international companies or local companies with international partnerships, the importance of the English language has only grown. Outsourcing of work by companies is a growing trend where the communication is almost entirely in the English language. Thus further emphasising the need for local graduates to have a firm grasp of this world language.

Based on the global analysis of workplace language skills conducted by the Cambridge English Language Assessment (2016) discovered several fields where English usage was within 87% to 100%. These fields include law, transportation, distribution, travel, leisure, hospitality, metals, mining, utilities, media, entertainment and arts, fast-moving consumer goods, construction, property, government, energy, consultation and professional services, financing and banking, engineering, I.T. and recruitment. Hence, it is evident that proficiency in the English language is skill all graduates must have to gain employment in most industries.

A study conducted by Zainuddin et al. (2019) found that there is an agreement among employers and students in Malaysia regarding the important role that English language plays in employment. However, they found differences in the students' perceptions and employers' expectations with regards to English language in the workplace. Therefore, it is important to conduct a needs analysis in order to investigate the demands of employers when it comes to ESC which this study will attempt to address. Other than that, this study will also gather data on students' perspectives regarding their use of ESC in the workplace, especially among those who are doing their internships.

1.1 Problem statement

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 states that one of the aspirations of the Ministry of Education is to bring Malaysian students to proficiency in both Bahasa Melayu and the English language (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Several of the ministry's aspirations include the introduction of the LINUS 2.0 that addresses English language literacy and the Aptis Test (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Nevertheless, this then extends to higher education on the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), where the requirement is for graduates to achieve proficiency in two languages (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). As elaborated in the blueprint, one top attribute that local industries look for when hiring fresh graduates is English language proficiency (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).

Industries are changing at a very rapid pace from time to time. With that in mind, the application of language for communication is also evolving. Language for communication, specifically spoken communication is an essential skill needed for Malaysian graduates to have. English, being a second language in Malaysia, is currently being taught to all Malaysian students in primary, secondary and also in tertiary education. Therefore, where tertiary education is concerned, do the ESC skills taught meet the demands of the industries? This needs to be addressed, as according to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020), the unemployment rate in Malaysia as of March 2020 is at 3.9%. Could it be one of the reasons due to weak English proficiency?

Additionally, despite there being local studies on the matter, (Isarji et al., 2013; Farahana et al., 2019; Parmjit et al., 2013; Rahmah et al., 2011; Siti et al., 2018; Perinpasingam et al., 2015), studies on English speaking skills' needs analysis implemented via the qualitative approach that triangulates findings from multiple industries are scarce at best. Henceforth, the researchers firmly believe that this gap needs to be bridged.

The English language is not being left out in the Malaysian tertiary institutions' syllabus. Almost every programme offered, be it a diploma or a bachelor's degree, would have an English language course to be taken by the students. These are usually managed by the language department of the institutions. These English courses would have the purpose of preparing the students for tests such as IELTS or MUET, for academic purposes such as in thesis writing, or for specific purposes such as business correspondence or workplace communication. Nevertheless, where workplace communication is concerned, are the courses offered in line with what is needed in the industries? This question needs to be responded to.

1.2 Purpose and research objectives

This paper aims to conduct a needs analysis on the Malaysian industries' demands regarding English spoken communication (ESC) skills at the workplace. There are a lot of previous studies which employed the quantitative approach in this area. Hence, there is a lack of in-depth studies that could provide insights from the industries to help improve Malaysian graduates' spoken communication skills in English language. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct a qualitative needs analysis on this matter based on these research objectives:

- 1) to discover the ESC skills demands from the industry representatives' point of view
- 2) to explore the interns' perspectives regarding their ESC skills at the workplace

Following the research objectives above, these are the research questions that this study intends to answer:

- 1) What are the relevant ESC skills at the workplace?
- 2) How are the ESC skills used at the workplace?
- 3) What are the expectations of future graduates with regards ESC skills?
- 4) What are the ESC skills lacking in the interns?
- 5) How relevant are the ESC skills learned prior to internship?

1.3 Significance of the study

It is expected that this study will benefit Malaysian tertiary education and the Malaysian industries. Almost every Malaysian tertiary education, whether public universities or private universities, would have a language department that focuses on the teaching of the English language towards the undergraduates. This study has the potential to become a guideline for these departments to enhance their curriculum in being up to date with the current demands of the industries with relation to ESC skills.

Speaking of which, Malaysian industries can also benefit from the study as this being a domino effect from the Malaysian tertiary education successfully producing graduates proficient in ESC skills which will eventually enter the Malaysian industries, using the skills for the betterment of the company or organisation they are attached to. This will, no doubt, increase the country's effectiveness in its businesses.

Lastly, this concept paper hopes to provide a clearer understanding on the field of English communication, English teaching and learning and the needs of English language learners. The study on needs analysis is nothing new but is a research area that is continuously evolving throughout the time which proves that it is still of relevance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research approaches in ESC studies

Communication skills are very essential at any workplace. Communicating in one's mother tongue is one thing; however, communicating in another language, be it second or third language is a different matter. There are more challenges in communicating in another language compared to communicating in one's native language. In Malaysia, English is the second language of the nation, and students are expected to master the language after 11 years of primary and secondary education so they are able to communicate in the language especially when they are at the workplace. Unfortunately, even with the 11 years of education and tertiary education, graduates in Malaysia are still seen to be having problems when it comes to communicating in English language (Azizi et al., 2011). This becomes one of the factors that contribute to the high unemployment among graduates in Malaysia (Jageer Singh & Raja Harun, 2020).

Hence, there are a lot of studies have conducted needs analysis to identify the English language skills required at the workplace (Jageer Singh & Raja Harun, 2020). Some studies employed the quantitative approach, but not many studies in this area employed the qualitative approach. Various results were revealed from the previous studies that shed valuable insights into the skills required when communicating in English language. The results from the needs analysis were significant and useful especially in curriculum reform and improvement in the tertiary institutions.

There were various studies conducted on English spoken communication skills with different approaches, methods, and designs. A lot of studies employed quantitative approach (Jageer Singh & Raja Harun, 2020; Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021; Jahara & Abdelrady, 2021; Nair et al., 2012) while some others employed qualitative and mixed-method approaches (Noviyenti et al., 2022; Malthus & Lu, 2012; Sedgwick & Garner, 2017). This section will discuss the different approaches that have been employed in investigating this topic.

Many previous studies have employed the quantitative approach (Amreet Kaur & Raja Nor Safinas, 2020; Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021; Nair et al., 2012). Amreet Kaur and Raja Nor Safinas (2020) conducted a study to investigate industrial trainees English language needs and usage at the workplace. This was a quantitative study with a survey research design, utilising questionnaire and semi-structured interviews as the instruments. Similarly, a study by Glomo-Narzoles and Glomo-Palermo (2021) also employed a descriptive study with focus group discussions as a complement to the questionnaire data. Meanwhile, Nair et al. (2012) utilised a descriptive study with questionnaire as the only instrument. Another study by Glomo-Narzoles and Glomo-Palermo (2021) also involved a quantitative approach to do research on multinational companies' employees' language needs. Just like the study by Singh and Harun (2020), this study also complemented their quantitative data with focused group discussion data. The data analysis process also involved descriptive statistics analyses. These two studies are similar in terms of the focus on the English language needs, where they studied all English language skills (listening, speaking, writing, reading, and grammar) instead of focusing only on one skill.

There have also been previous research that have chosen the qualitative approach to study this area. For example, Sedgwick and Garner (2017) studied speaking communication skills among nurses in London using a qualitative approach. The design of the study was a tracking study complemented with focus groups. The tracking study method was conducted to personally interview some nurses where they recounted their interactions of speaking with different people at their workplace. This method was then followed up by focus groups with 11 nurses which were divided into two different groups. By employing these methods, the

researchers managed to gain detailed information regarding the nurses' general spoken interactions daily as well as obtained their personal thoughts regarding their spoken communication at the workplace. For data analysis, thematic coding was performed using Nvivo 10 software. This study focused on the ESC skills among the nurses.

Another qualitative study conducted by Noviyenti et al. (2022) studied the communication strategies of English-speaking lecturers' performances in order to improve the communicative competence of their students. The researchers observed and interviewed the lecturers and students accordingly to determine whether the lecturers' strategies could improve the students' competence. This study found various strategies used by the lecturers to improve their students' communicative competence such as by praising and encouraging them, telling the students to not worry too much about English grammar rules, and directly teaching them communication strategies. In this particular context, the students' communicative competence was taught and trained in an educational context, and not in the workplace context.

Meanwhile, Malthus and Lu (2012) investigated the students' perceptions from the Bachelor of Nursing programme in their success in developing English spoken communication skills for workplace purposes. Based on their semi-structured interviews, it was found that the students' developed speaking skills through personal interactions which allowed them to learn the socio-cultural aspects, and became active learners when studying and working. It was observed that the students' active participation in improving their spoken communication skills helped in this aspect of language acquisition. This study specifically interviewed the students on how they developed their communication skills, but not on the demands of the employers and their perspectives on students' English spoken communication skills.

Based on the studies discussed above, it was observed that most studies conducted on English spoken communication skills were done quantitatively, and there were not a lot of qualitative studies in this area. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct a needs analysis using more qualitative approaches to discover the demands of the employers towards the graduates' English spoken communication skills. This is crucial to see whether the future graduates could fulfil the demands of the employers, besides exploring the graduates' perspectives on their own communication skills.

2.2 ESC skills demands from employers

Due to the vast usage of English language in the industrial sector, many employers look for employees who are proficient in the language, especially when it comes to ESC skills. This is because a lot of discussions or presentations in businesses are conducted in the English language, especially when foreign or international companies are involved. Therefore, when an employee is unable to communicate sufficiently in English language, there are some obstacles or challenges that will be encountered when conducting workplace transactions. This is proven in a study conducted by Matisane et al. (2022), when some occupational safety and health (OSH) immigrant and minority employers were unable to perform well at their workplace due to their inability to understand the OSH procedures and requirements which are mostly in English language. This is one clear example of the importance of English language usage in the workplace, as the inability to communicate may cause misunderstandings and miscommunication to happen.

Employers nowadays take English language proficiency among employees very seriously. This is evident in a study by Lan (2022) who found that the employers in his study regarded those with good English language proficiency very highly. According to the employers, reading and speaking skills are very important and they prioritised candidates who have high proficiency in these skills to be their employees. The results of this study supported Matisane's et al. (2022) study mentioned above. On the other hand, Olha et al.

(2022) revealed in their study that engineering students found the skills of English writing and speaking to be the most challenging. If the students could not master these skills, then they will not be able to fulfil the employers' demands when it comes to using English language at the workplace. Thus, this further emphasizes the reality that ESC skills are crucial to be possessed and mastered among university students.

Employers put a lot of emphasis on their employees' competence in communication skills, especially in the English language. This is shown in a study conducted by Ting et al. (2017), whereby the employers mentioned they need employees who are able to make themselves understood when communicating, socializing with others well, and are able to communicate with people from all ages and levels. This will be very difficult to do, especially when an employee is not even able to master basic English language communication skills. Speaking in English language goes beyond making oneself understood, and it mostly includes the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of the language as well. Hence, this study is going to be conducted to further identify and confirm the demands of the employers when it comes to ESC.

3.0 Methodology and timeline

This study will employ a qualitative approach in conducting the needs analysis. The reason for this approach is due to the fact that this approach will help the current study to understand how the sample study constructs, interprets, and adds meaning to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, this study seeks to probe and explore further on the thoughts and experiences of the industry representatives and the interns in regard to the ESC skills. By employing this approach, this study would be able to thoroughly discuss any complex issues (Md Shidur, 2016) that might not be captured by the quantitative approach. The relevance of in-depth data is highly essential in identifying the ESC skills applied within the local industries - what are the skills applied, why are they applied, how are they applied. Furthermore, via the method of probing, the present researchers are able to discuss how the respondents feel, something that is difficult to be captured via quantitative methods.

Specifically, this study has chosen to use the phenomenological design. This design is chosen as it allows researchers to study a sample's emotion, affection, and intense experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To truly understand what a sample has gone through and what meaning the sample gives to the experience, the focus of this design is to capture the "essence and basic structure of experience" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and discuss it without any biases, assumptions, or prejudices, or through what scholars describe as bracketing (Qutoshi, 2018). The previous studies conducted on ESC skills lack discussion on the personal and intricate experiences of the samples, hence this study intends to shed some light on these aspects.

The samples for this study will be the representatives and interns from three industrial fields which are science and technology, social sciences and humanities, and business management. Six companies will be involved, and semi-structured interviews will be the instrument for this project. The rationale behind opting for interns as respondents is the interns have gone through the courses offered at the respective faculties and would have a clearer view on the relevance of what they have learned in comparison with what they are applying with regards to ESC. As for the representative from industries, the proposed study seeks to have either hiring managers, or those involved in the decision making on recruitment for the selected companies as respondents. The motive behind this is as these are the industry representatives that have the decision-making power in deciding potential hires, thus are aware of the ESC skills needed in the company.

The sample selection technique chosen is purposive sampling technique, in which 2 industry representatives and 2 interns from each field will be selected carefully through a set of pre-determined criteria. The industrial representatives must be someone who knows thoroughly the company operations, especially

where English communication is concerned. With that, it is pertinent that the companies selected engage in English language communication either internally or externally. Secondly, the representative chosen must have deciding powers when it comes to hiring. As for the interns, they must be carefully selected based on their application on ESC skills at the workplace. In total, 6 industry representatives and 6 interns will be interviewed in this study.

This project will go through 5 phases to complete. The first phase of the study involves the development of the research instrument, namely the semi-structured interview. The development of the interview questions will be based on a comprehensive review of literature related to this study's topic. In this phase as well, the application of ethical approval will be done accordingly, to ensure that this study will be conducted ethically. The questions are based on the verbal communication skills list by Doyle (2020). The proposed interview questions intended for the participants are as follows:

- Do you consider English spoken communication important for your company / organisation? Why?
- Do you measure a potential staff member's English speaking proficiency at the job interview level?
- Are your staff members expected to speak in English at work?
- In what situations are your staff members required to speak in English?
- Do your staff members use English at the workplace for these situations:
 - advising others
 - being assertive
 - conveying feedback
 - negotiating
 - providing justifications
 - disciplining subordinates
 - giving credits where appropriate
 - giving objections
 - countering objections
 - speaking calmly
 - conveying messages concisely
 - paraphrasing to show understanding
 - requesting feedback
 - stating needs, wants, or feelings
 - criticising
 - seeking clarifications
 - asking open-ended questions to clients
 - presentation skills during meetings
 - presentation skills with clients or stakeholders
 - reporting outcomes
- Aside from face-to-face communication, do your staff members use English language for the following purposes:
 - Official telephone conversations
 - Virtual meetings
- Does English language acquisition play a role in your staff upward mobility within your organisation?

Once the approval for ethics application is received, this study will start its second phase, which is the validation and pilot study procedures. The semi-structured interview questions developed in the first stage will go through expert validation, in which two experts will be chosen to assess the questions. After the validation process, this study will test the semi-structured interview questions through pilot interview sessions, in which some students who are currently in their internship will be selected. Based on the results of the pilot interviews, the questions will be reviewed and amended as needed.

The next phase of this study is the data collection and data analysis process. Interview sessions will be arranged accordingly by contacting the selected participants as mentioned above. Consent from the participants will be obtained first before starting the interview sessions with the participants. During the sessions, the interview will be recorded (with participants' consent) for the purpose of data analysis afterwards. Two proposed interview methods are to be practised, which depends on the convenience of the respondents. The first method is a face-to-face interview. If the respondent is busy or geographically unavailable, then the researcher can opt for a virtual interview as a method, using any preferred virtual conference application such as Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Skype or Zoom and to ensure that the virtual sessions are recorded.

The data analysis procedure will be conducted once the data collection process is completed. In ensuring the validity and reliability of the findings, the interview questions will go through an expert in the field of English language needs analysis or English for specific purposes to ensure that the interview questions proposed do measure what is being intended. Furthermore, following the transcribed verbatim, the researcher will move towards respondent validation by inviting the respondents to provide comments on the interview transcript and determine whether the themes identified reflect what is being investigated. As the verification process is complete, the data analysis will be started by utilising the Nvivo software. Codification and thematic analysis will be conducted accordingly to identify any emerging codes and themes from the data collected.

4. Conclusion

It is hoped that the findings put forward in this research will help to paint a clearer picture of the phenomenon of ESC skills applied at the workplace so that local English language institutions can prepare Malaysian graduates to be well equipped with the skills needed for them to excel. The possibility of the findings to be applied or referred to in future curriculum reviews on the teaching and learning of English language is endless. The curriculum and syllabus in education institutions need to be updated from time to time and aligned with the industry needs so the graduates will be able to keep up and adapt to the demands of the work industries.

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