

The Use of English among Supply Chain Workers in Malaysia

M. K. Puteri Zarina, S. Rosly, J. Nurain, A. Ismail, N. Khalid

Abstract: *English language is an international language which is predominantly used as the language of process and development. In Malaysia, English is the medium of communication in major development activity areas such as business, education, and others. Supply chain industry, particularly logistics, is one of the rapidly expanding economic sectors in Malaysia. The global landscape of the industry is changing rapidly, and this has generated many issues which are worthy of in-depth research related to logistics especially those involving the use of English as a business language. This paper investigates the use of spoken English amongst workers in logistics companies in northern parts of Malaysia. Data were collected from a survey questionnaire distributed to the respondents in the logistics and inventory departments of the respective companies located in Penang and Perak, Malaysia. The findings suggest that the spoken English is indeed useful in daily activities in their occupation.*

Keywords: *spoken English, supply chain, logistics, inventory, workers.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The current globalised scenario with its political, economic, cultural and geographic ties is one of the main reasons that drives non-native speakers of English to be proficient and effective speakers of the language. Now, in the supply chain industries, face-to-face contacts with people from across the globe are increasing and necessary. In most interactions, English is by far the most common language. In business activities especially in logistics, human interaction relies heavily on English communication. There are manifold benefits of effective English communication. One of the benefits is that augment various facets of our personal and professional lives.

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Ineffective or misinterpreted messages delivered through flawed communication in our personal lives may result in problems or discomfort but in our professional lives the repercussion resulting from misunderstandings may cause much more grave consequences. In the international shipping realm, for example, with seafarers from all over the world sailing on vessels trading to all corners of the world, effective communication between those on board and between ship and shore is vital. Logistics, which is a sub-process within Supply Chain Management (SCM) deals with the planning and control of the material flows and its missions to get the materials or goods to the right place and at the right time in any part of the world. The logistics system consists of a set of facilities linked with the transportation services like air ways, water ways, rail ways and others. Additionally, the logistics system constitutes three main activities such as order processing, inventory management and freight transportation. Order processing is related to the information flow in the logistics system where customers may have to request the product by filling out an order form. These orders are to be transmitted and checked. Inventory management in the supply chain system refers to the planning and operations of goods waiting to be manufactured, transported or sold. Usually not all items or products can be obtained in the local area; most of them can only be acquired from external sources. In such situations, English plays an important role as the language of communication between the local buyers and the foreign sellers from other parts of the world. Therefore, it is imperative for Malaysian workforce in the logistics industry to be satisfactorily conversant in English so as to ensure effective communication with customers, particularly the foreign ones. The problem of English language competency and ability to communicate effectively and interactively in order to maximise performance at workplace among workers in various industries has long been debated and researched.

Generally, employers have often called for market-oriented people who have the ability to converse and communicate satisfactorily in English.

Realising the dominance of English in the world, this study focuses on the importance of spoken English in the logistics activities in northern Malaysia. The purpose of this study is to investigate how the spoken English is used among the workers especially in the logistics-related activities in Malaysia as well as the importance given to language competency during recruitment and at the workplace. The findings of this study would further enhance and give an insight to language instructors and course developers in consolidating the existing English courses to satisfy the demands of the logistics industry.

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The objectives of this research are firstly to determine the importance of communication in English being used in the supply chain companies in the northern part of Malaysia in two sub-sections i.e. logistics and inventory. Secondly, this paper also aims to investigate how communication in English differs across departments in the two sections i.e. logistics and inventory in the companies. The research questions below are derived from the above objectives:

1. What is the perception of workers in the logistics and inventory sub-industries in three supply chain companies towards the importance of verbal communication in English at the workplace?

2. How does verbal communication in English differ across departments in the related supply chain sub-industries i.e. logistics and inventory?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the launch of vision 2020 by Tun Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad, Malaysia's prime minister at that time, the status of English as a medium of global communication has been further strengthened. This reflects the relative importance of English in accomplishing the national strategies and ambitious aim to make Malaysia a fully developed nation by 2020. Throughout the world, English is used in numerous sectors.

There is a huge demand for English in the business domain in Malaysia as the economic sector will continue to flourish. English is fast establishing its presence as the official language particularly in the business and corporate sectors. English is crucial for business expansion, image building and sometimes it acts as a meter of survival in today's era of globalisation where local businesses are constantly facing intense competition both from local counterparts and foreign companies. Business organisations whose workforces are proficient in English are believed to be at the edge in numerous respects and are more privileged in the promotional exercises.

Sarudin et al. [1] reported five dimensions which were deemed crucial at the workplace in Malaysia. The dimensions were:

- i. the importance of English language proficiency at the workplace,
- ii. employees' preparedness to perform tasks in English,
- iii. evaluation of the English competency of the potential employees in the recruitment process,
- iv. employers' English language training and
- v. English competency certification assessment

Although the findings in this study disclosed the fact that English language proficiency was more inherent in some dimensions than others, it would be valuable to determine whether English was regarded the language for communication within the work environment in the local contexts.

The engineering sector in Malaysia requires certain standards of proficiency in English from their employees. This is because the language is the lingua franca in numerous disciplines. In order to understand the current demand of the civil engineering industry on the use of the English language in the workplace, Saleh and Murtaza [2] conducted a study on

twenty undergraduates of the Civil and Environmental Engineering Faculty, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia who underwent their industrial training. The finding revealed the importance of the speaking skills for civil engineers at the workplace. Verbal communication in English was needed for attending meetings, participating in seminars or conferences, talking about daily tasks or duties, in addition to giving presentations and holding discussions about daily situations.

The rapidly growing economy of China necessitates the broadening and deepening of inter-cultural communication in business between her people and the global citizens. Yao [3] found that English was found to be growing in importance in state-owned companies, privately-owned companies, and multinational companies. In addition, the findings also indicated there was an increasing use of English among Chinese business professionals. This finding is corroborated by a study by He [4] which drew data from 2,247 participants in workplaces from the government, public service unit, and companies across China on their use of English at the workplace. Despite infrequent use of English among Chinese professionals, the results indicated that the majority of the respondents did recognise the high importance of English in the workplace.

The importance of good communication skills in English at the workplace is also the gist of the findings by Ahmad Tajuddin [5]. This study highlights stakeholders' scepticism of the quality of English taught to potential employees in educational institutions. The scepticism concerns the usefulness and practicality of the English Language courses particularly for professional communication skills taught in these institutions for employment purposes in the industries.

English is a growing medium of communication in Thailand among the businessmen there. However, the spoken English is not as frequently used as the written form among the businessmen who communicated heavily via electronic mails as shown in a study by Hiranburana [6]. Meanwhile, in Malaysia, employers in the private sectors perceived language proficiency and communication skills as being two different entities. To these employers, English proficiency is not as crucial as communication skills except in sectors that demand extensive communication such as marketing or services. The study also highlights that satisfactory communication skills will guarantee increased employability opportunities for job applicants.

Both employers and students agree that English is one of the major determinants of employability. However, despite a consensus between both that good grasp of grammar and extensive vocabulary are significant, the findings in a study by Zainuddin, Pillai, Perlag and Phillip [7] indicated several disparities with regard to students' perceptions and employers' expectations. One of the issues is the blatant use of the colloquial form of English at the workplace which employers found unfavourable. The employers in the research felt that communicative skills in other languages, confidence and a good attitude are among factors that would land a job applicant with the desired employment.

The discrepancies between the graduates' perceptions and employers' expectations should be an important point for consideration in the planning of English Language courses. This is imperative to ensure that graduates are well-prepared linguistically for employment.

Ting et al. [8] found that employers perceived language proficiency and communication skill as diverse elements but accepted the fact that an immensely poor language command may hinder communication. To these employers, job seekers with average English proficiency who could communicate effectively may end up being hired due to their ability to communicate their ideas confidently. What this suggests is that good communication skill is a more crucial factor to consider than proficiency for graduate employability.

The literature has confirmed the need for employees to be satisfactorily conversant in the English Language in order to stay effective at the workplace. However, very little is known about the need for such language competency in the supply chain industry particularly in its sub-processes or sub-sections of logistics and inventory in Malaysia. This study would thus be able to shed some light on this pertinent demand in the supply chain industry.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

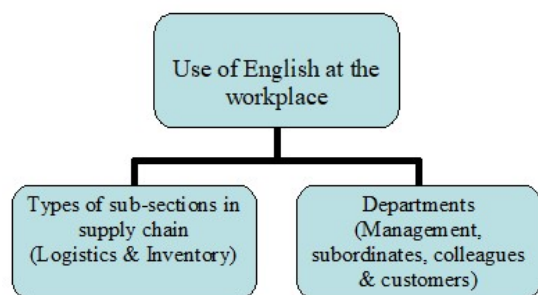


Fig. 1 Theoretical framework of study

Figure I shows the theoretical framework of the research. This study examines the use of English at the workplace based on (a) the types of sub-section in the supply chain industry and (b) the departments in the respective sub-sections. The sub-sections chosen are logistics and inventory. In addition to that, within each sub-section, the use of English may differ among departments such as communication with the management members, communication with the subordinates, communication with the co-workers or colleagues and lastly, communication with the customers.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This research design employed the descriptive analysis and statistical techniques to compare the respondent groups. For the purpose of data analysis, mean score, t-test and one-way ANOVA were performed according to the necessary requirements. Prior to the analyses above, the data were also explored for normality and reliability.

The questionnaires were distributed to a total of 75 respondents working in three supply chain companies in Penang and Perak. The instrument comprised two sections: Section A - respondent's demographics, Section B - the

importance of English at the workplace, and Section C - communication in English across departments in the companies. There are four dimensions gauging the usage of the spoken English in the workplace namely communication with the management members, communication with the subordinates, communication with co-workers/colleagues, and communication with the customers. The respondents were required to respond to the options based on a 5-point Likert scale with the following categories:

- 1-never
- 2-seldom
- 3-sometimes
- 4-frequently
- 5-always

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Respondents' demographic profiles

In this study, 75% out of the 75 respondents were males with 62% being in the age range of between 24 to 45 years old. In terms of academic qualification, 66.6% of the participants were degree holders while diploma holders made up the remaining 33.3%. 43 of the respondents were attached to the logistics division (12 in company A, 15 company B and 16 in Company C). The other 32 out of 75 respondents were attached to the inventory unit (9 in Company A, 10 in company B and 13 in Company C).

A. Reliability analysis

The reliability coefficients of the four scopes revealed high consistency: communication with management members as measured by 7 items yielded a reading of 0.780; communication with subordinates (7 items) yielded a coefficient value of 0.83; communication with co-workers/colleagues (5 items) produced a coefficient of 0.82 and communication with customers (6 items) showed a coefficient of 0.810. Alpha coefficient being greater than 0.7 implies that the scales possessed relatively high internal consistencies [9].

B. The Importance of communication in English

For research objective 1 which sought to seek the respondents' perception towards the importance of communication in English at their workplace, the data were computed on the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS ver. 23).

The percentage scores of all the responses from the respondents in all three companies were analysed and the analysis yielded that 80% of the 75 respondents agreed that English was important at their respective workplaces.

C. Dimensions of Communication in English

To find answers to research objective 2, the mean scores of the four dimensions of verbal communication in English i.e. the management members, subordinates, co-workers and customers, were computed. Table 1 shows that all the dimensions have the mean scores of more than 4, whereby

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verbal communication in English with the management had the highest score of 4.43 followed by communication with customers with a mean score of 4.35.

Communication with subordinates yielded a mean score of 4.34 and the dimension with the least mean. This finding concurs with that of the research by Sarudin et al. [1], which proved that English was indeed a language used as a medium of communication within the same department, particularly for communication with the superiors or management members.

Table. 1 Mean scores of the dimensions in communication

Dimension	Number of survey items	Mean score
Communication with management members	7	4.43
Communication with subordinates	7	4.34
Communication with co-workers	5	4.13
Communication with customers	6	4.35

In order to determine the significant difference in the communication of English across the sub-industries in supply chain, a one-way ANOVA analysis was performed to compare the mean scores of the four dimensions across the sub-industries i.e. logistics and inventory. As the data in this study were derived from multiple sub-groups within two larger groups i.e. logistics and inventory, an analysis of one-way ANOVA was warranted. In each sub-industry, statistically, three out of the four dimensions were significantly different among their mean scores (p -value < 0.05). The findings established the fact that except for the dimension of communication with the co-workers, significant differences were found among the mean scores of the other three dimensions in logistics and inventory.

Table. 2 ANOVA analysis of the dimensions within the sub-industry of logistics

Type of sub-industry	Dimension	Mean	Sig.
Logistics	Communication with management members	4.45	0.01
	Communication with subordinates	4.37	0.01
	Communication with co-workers	3.01	0.07
	Communication with customers	4.22	0.02

* The mean difference is significant at 0.05

Table 2 above exhibits the result of the analysis of the dimensions within the logistics sub-industry. It was found that within the logistics sub-industry of supply chain, there were significant differences in terms of communication with their management members (mean=4.45; $p=0.01$, < 0.05), subordinates (mean=4.37; $p=0.01$, < 0.05) and customers (mean=4.22; $p=0.02$, < 0.05). It was also found that there was no significant difference in communication with co-workers (mean=3.01; $p=0.07$, > 0.05).

Table 3 below exhibits the result of the analysis of the dimensions within the inventory sub-industry of supply chain.

It was found that within this particular sub-industry, there were significant differences in terms of communication with their management members (mean=4.53; $p=0.01$, < 0.05), subordinates (mean=4.41; $p=0.01$, < 0.05) and customers (mean=4.34; $p=0.01$, < 0.05). It was also found that there was no significant difference in communication with co-workers (mean=3.11; $p=0.06$, > 0.05).

Table. 3 ANOVA analysis of the dimensions within the sub-industry of inventory

Type of sub-industry	Dimension	Mean	Sig.
Inventory	Communication with management members	4.53	0.01
	Communication with subordinates	4.41	0.01
	Communication with co-workers	3.11	0.06
	Communication with customers	4.34	0.01

* The mean difference is significant at 0.05

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has focused on investigating how the spoken English is used in the sub-industries of chain supply namely logistics and inventory in three supply chain-based companies in northern Peninsular Malaysia. The findings revealed that the workers in the said industries did use English while communicating with numerous parties at the workplace. Specifically, English was used more when communicating with the management, sub-ordinates as well as with customers. However, English was not a favoured medium when communicating among themselves as co-workers and colleagues at the workplace. This could have been attributed to their familiarity with each other which induced them to resort to using their mother tongue in discussing work-related or non-work-related matters at the workplace.

The fact that English was not the favoured medium of communication with co-workers or colleagues in both the logistics and inventory sub-industries of supply chain indicates that the mother tongue was still by far the preferred language for communication. Nevertheless, it was not entirely surprising to find that English was the main choice for communication at the workplace in Malaysia, particularly in the private sectors.

With regard to the pedagogical aspect, it is implied that tertiary institutions must ensure that their graduates who are about to enter the work force are prepared and ever ready to use English as a medium of communication. Comprehensive measures must be taken by the universities to ensure that graduates are trained with the necessary oral communication skills such as presentation skills and writing skills for them to contribute effectively at the workplace.

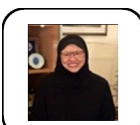
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