

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STAFF'S READINESS TO COMMUNICATE IN ENGLISH AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH AT THE WORKPLACE

Noor Aishah Idrishah¹, Laily Murny²

¹Centre of Language and Foundation Studies
Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah

²Centre for Foundation Studies
Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS

ABSTRACT : *This study aims to investigate the possible factor(s) that might be the contributor(s) to the staff's readiness to communicate in English along with their perceptions towards the importance of English as a means of communication at the workplace. This study applied the quantitative method where the adapted questionnaire survey was distributed to 102 participants of USAS administrative staff from various departments. The data gathered were analysed using SPSS to extract the mean scores and the correlation coefficient values. The findings revealed that among the three possible factors (psychological, environmental and proficiency), the psychological factor was the most significant contributor that affected the staff's readiness to communicate in English at their workplace (3.02). Despite that, the staff's optimistic impressions reflected their desire to participate in English lessons to improve their proficiency. Overall, their perceptions towards the importance of English as a means of communication are displayed by the 86.3% agreement that English is important in their job scope. Meanwhile, a majority of 51% agreed that they need to improve on all four basic skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking).*

KEYWORDS: *English communication, perceptions, proficiency, readiness, workplace*

I. INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency encompasses a wide range of skills and abilities, and it goes beyond the understanding of the meanings of words and sentences. In general, it refers to the mastery of four main domains, which are reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Though all domains are equally important, speaking is considered the most crucial skill to master in workplace and corporate settings (Clement & Murugavel, 2018). English is unanimously regarded as the global language of business and has long been used by multinational corporate companies such as Airbus, Samsung, Microsoft as their main medium of instruction (Neely, 2012 & Ting et al., 2017)

It is safe to say that impressive resumes and experience are no longer the major requirements to get employed as employers nowadays are looking into proficiency and good communication in English (Sarudin et al., 2013 & Pandey, 2014). A recent study by Clement and Murugavel (2018) also suggested that this trend will not die down anytime soon as English language requirements will likely increase every year and employees without adequate English language skills may find it very challenging to grow professionally. Since the demand for a good command of English language is widely applied worldwide, every working sector of all backgrounds and natures will not be excluded from dealing with this issue.

A similar scenario can also be witnessed among the administrative staff at a private university in Perak, who are the participants of this study. Based on observations conducted, it can be seen that most of the administrative staffs are displaying an unwillingness and unreadiness to use English as a medium of communication in their daily work activities. Some are even reluctant to improve their English proficiency, as they believe it is irrelevant to their job scope. Research is being conducted to investigate the factors that influence their readiness to communicate in English in the workplace.

This study will also explore their perceptions and opinions on the measurements taken by the institution to help them enhance their English-speaking skills, which would also be very helpful and beneficial to both staff and the university. There are many studies on the willingness to communicate in English (Fahim & Dhamotharan, 2016, Weda et al., 2020, & Asif et al., 2018), but most of the studies are focused more on in-class contexts where the respondents are ESL learners. Thus, this current study aims to fill the research gap by focusing on readiness among employees, the least focused and studied group, as the target participants.

1.1 Research Objectives

- a. To identify the contributing factors that affect the willingness or unwillingness to speak English in the workplace among administrative staff.
- b. To investigate administrative staff perceptions of the use of English as a means of communication, as well as the skills that need to be improved in the workplace.

1.1.1 Ability to communicate in English

The notion of the willingness to communicate (WTC) was first introduced by McCroskey and Bear (1985) which refers to a state of readiness to speak freely, without fear at a particular time with a specific person or group of people using a foreign language (MacIntyre et al., 2001). Pakpahan et al. (2017) state that the key component to achieve language learning goals is by showing the willingness to communicate in the target language. Suksawas (2011) elaborates more on the concept of WTC where it has been expanded by MacIntyre et al. (1998) into a model of L2 willingness to communicate. The model consists of six layers and within each layer are certain variables expected to produce a “situational influence” on the learners' willingness to communicate. Suksawas also added that the empirical study of WTC has two divisions; to communicate as a trait-like construct and to communicate as a situational construct.

1.1.2 Factors affecting willingness to communicate

Aksak and Cubukcu (2020) mention that many factors can negatively affect the learners' communication behaviours, which are classified into three categories: affective, environmental, and teacher-related factors. Susanti (2021) claims that students' WTC plays an essential role in determining their language production, especially in oral communication. When the students are willing to communicate, their language production increases thus improving their speaking and communication skills. Since it is a fundamental goal across all settings to learn a language, it is essential to explore the possible factors that might affect the learners' WTC and try to find viable solutions to this problem.

1.1 Previous Research

An adequate number of studies have been conducted on factors that affect the learners' WTC in learning the language, especially English. Riasati (2018) conducted a survey involving Iranian EFL learners to investigate learners' willingness to speak English in language classrooms. The findings show that the learners were fairly willing (but not highly willing) to speak English in class which was influenced by several factors such as topic of discussion, effect of interlocutor, shyness, self-confidence teacher, and classroom atmosphere. A similar study was conducted by Pakpahan et al. (2017) which revealed that linguistic, psycholinguistic, sociocultural, and institutional factors are the main factors that notably affect students' willingness to communicate in English. Maryansyah (2019) carried out a study on WTC on social media platforms. Findings of the study revealed five factors affecting the learners' WTC: self-confidence, personality, motivation, attitude, and anxiety with motivation being the most dominant.

A recent study by Raffi on Indonesian EFL (2021) also found anxiety as one of the factors influencing students' WTC. Another study on a similar topic by Asif et al. (2018) discovered key factors such as linguistics, individual, social, psychological, and institutional barriers that prevent learners from using English to communicate. Sylvia et al., (2020) conducted a study on low and high English ability students' willingness to communicate, and the finding showed that confidence and classroom environment are some factors that affect their willingness to communicate.

Most of the studies mentioned above examined WTC at a tertiary level, focusing on language learners and the contributing factors that affect their willingness to communicate. Relatively few studies have been conducted to investigate the willingness to communicate among working adults in different contexts and settings. One example is by Kloy-Eiam's (2008) who investigated the relationship between employees' willingness to communicate with job satisfaction and self-perceived productivity. Findings from this study discovered that attitude towards communication was positively correlated to willingness to communicate. However, the willingness to communicate was not significantly associated with self-perceived productivity. Another study conducted by Pianrapeekul (2016) on banking employees in Bangkok revealed that bank employees possessed the willingness to communicate and self-efficacy in English at a slightly higher than moderate level and that the willingness to communicate and self-efficacy were correlated.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research aims to bring forth the contributing factors that affect the staff's readiness to communicate in English together with their perceptions towards the importance of English as a means of communication in the workplace. The

target participants of this study were 102 administrative staffs which were chosen based on the non-probability sampling technique. This study employed a quantitative method involving a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire that consisted of two parts; Part A- Background Information and Proficiency Level and Part B- Contributing Factors that Affect the Staff's Readiness to Communicate in English.

The Likert-scale questionnaire was used because it is a standard instrument for measuring affective variables such as attitudes, motivation, and self-efficacy of an individual or group of individuals in a social phenomenon (Batterton & Hale, 2017; Nemoto & Beglar, 2014). There are 7 questions for Part A and 24 items for Part B, with 8 items for each of the three factors (psychological, environmental and proficiency). The total number of questions for both parts is 31.

The instrument used for this study was adapted from previous research conducted by Ningrum (2019) which analysed students' reluctance to speak in English. Nevertheless, to better suit the target respondents of this study, some amendments and modifications have been made. To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot test has been conducted by using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to measure the internal reliability or the item interrelatedness of Likert scaled questions of the adapted questionnaire (Bonett & Wright, 2014) and the coefficient result has surpassed the minimum score.

The participants were given two days to complete the survey. The questionnaire survey is also translated into Bahasa Malaysia to ease the participants' comprehension and to avoid any confusion with the terminologies or jargon used in English. The data derived from the responses of the participants was then analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software programme and displayed in tables and descriptions. The data for Part A was analysed in descriptive statistics to find the percentage and frequency. The data for Part B was analysed to find the mean and standard deviation.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are divided into three sections, and the results for the first section are as follows.

Table 1: Demographic Background

Items	Subitems	N	(%)
Gender	Male	42	41.2
	Female	60	58.8
Level of Education	SPM/STPM/STAM	34	33.3
	Diploma	26	25.5
	Degree	30	29.4
	Master/Doctorate	12	11.8
English Proficiency Level	Very Good	1	1.0
	Good	29	28.4
	Moderate	62	60.8
	Weak	10	9.8

As stated in Table 1, 41.2% of the participants are male and another 58.8% are female. The population gap between male and female is quite significant, but the results obtained for this particular study were not affected by the participants' gender. Based on the data gathered, 33.3% of the participants have SPM/STPM/STAM qualification, followed by 29.4% and 25.5% with degree and diploma consecutively, and the remaining 11.8% with master or doctorate background. The participants also rated their proficiency levels with almost 60.8% claimed to be at a moderate level while very good, good, and weak levels stand at 1.0%, 28.4% and 9.8% consecutively.

Before exploring the possible contributing factors to the staff's readiness to communicate, their perceptions of the importance of the English language in their job scope were first analysed. It would be a significant indicator to check their readiness to communicate in English at the workplace by understanding their perceptions. From the data gathered and displayed in Table 2, 86.3% of the participants agreed that English is essential in their job scope and only 13.7% indicated otherwise.

Table 2: The Importance of English Language in Their Job Scope

Items	SubItems	N	(%)
The Importance of English	Yes	88	86.3
	No	14	13.7

Three factors have been listed as the possible factors that contribute to the staff's readiness to use English at their workplace: psychological, environmental, and proficiency.

Table 3: Contributing Factors That Affect the Staff's Readiness to Communicate in English at the Workplace

		Psychological	Environmental	Proficiency
N	Valid	102	102	102
	Missing	0	0	0
Mean		3.0282	2.5368	2.6250
Std. Deviation		.67987	.54147	.66980

As shown in Table 3, the participants were required to answer a questionnaire which consisted of 24 items related to all three contributing factors that lead to their readiness to communicate in English at the workplace. The findings showed that psychological factor was the main contributor to their readiness with a mean score of 3.02, followed by a proficiency factor of 2.62 and environmental factor with 2.53. This has proven that psychological aspect played a crucial role in determining their readiness to communicate in English at the workplace.

Fourth item in Table 4; *I am not afraid if someone corrected my grammatical mistakes*, was recorded with the highest mean (3.73), which showed that most of the participants are fearful of being corrected by someone when it involved grammatical errors. This finding is aligned with studies conducted by Ansari (2015) and Arifin (2017), who found out that the fear of being corrected by someone was one of the contributors to learners' unwillingness to speak in English.

Table 4: Psychological Factor

ITEM(s)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I am not shy to speak English in front of people	102	3.11	.915
I am usually a person who initiates English conversation	102	2.48	.919
I am not afraid of making mistakes when speaking English	102	3.15	.941
I am not afraid if someone corrected my grammatical mistakes	102	3.73	.943
I feel confident when speaking English in public	102	2.89	.866
I feel comfortable to communicate using English at workplace	102	2.96	.782
I have high motivation to speak and practice English skill	102	3.09	.850
I did not feel anxious if I have to explain in English	102	2.78	.960

As for the environmental factor in Table 5, the sixteenth item; *I have supportive people at workplace to practice my English* was recorded with a high mean score of 3.11 reflected that the participants viewed their current workplace environment as being unsupportive when it comes to practicing their English language. Ali et al. (2020) and Agarwal and Thakur (2014) supported this notion as their findings showed the classroom and school environment to be crucial in language learning. In contrast, all items in the next section (proficiency factor) recorded approximately similar mean scores as shown in Table 6.

Table 5: Environmental Factor

ITEM(s)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
9. I speak English because it is widely used at my workplace compared to other languages	102	2.54	.828
10. My friends and I use English to communicate with each other	102	2.29	.752
11. I use English at workplace to complete my task	102	2.40	.811
12. I frequently use English to communicate with my employers	102	2.18	.754
13. I am used to English speaking surroundings outside of my workplace	102	2.39	.902
14. I use English at work during meetings, briefings, and presentations	102	2.27	.785
15. I have never been looked down when using broken English to communicate	102	3.07	.930
16. I have supportive people at workplace to practice my English	102	3.11	.859

In contrast, all items received average mean scores for the proficiency factor in Table 6. Despite that, item 23; *I am able to express myself well in English* received the highest mean score which indicates that the respondents are not confident enough to express themselves in English language. Item 17; *I can speak English very well* came in second with 2.81 mean score which shows that the respondent believed that they could not speak English very well.

Table 6: Proficiency Factor

ITEM(s)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
17. I can speak English very well	102	2.81	.805
18. I have a high proficiency level in English	102	2.58	.800
19. My speaking skills are better than other language skills	102	2.46	.779
20. I have broad vocabulary in English	102	2.43	.764
21. I can speak good English with correct grammar	102	2.48	.767
22. I scored a good result in my previous English test	102	2.74	.875
23. I am able to express myself well in English	102	2.82	.825
24. I can speak about work or personal matters without difficulty in English	102	2.65	.838

Generally, these findings provide the answer for the first research question as they identified the three factors that contributed to participants' readiness to communicate in English at workplace, with psychological as the significant contributor compared to environmental and proficiency factors. This shows that their readiness to utilize English as a means of communication is heavily influenced by their own anxiety and fear when communicating in English. The fear and anxiousness might be triggered by lack of motivation and fear of committing mistake as other might judge them.

This study also looked at the participants' perceptions on the use of English to communicate and the preferred skills to be improved for workplace purposes. Two items from section A of the questionnaire were used to check on their perceptions of English language use. 77.5% of the participants responded yes to the fifth item, 'Are you interested to join any English proficiency class provided by the employer?'. 86.3% responded positively to item number 7 which focused on their perceptions of the importance of English language in their job scope. As for the most desired or preferred skill(s) to be improved, 51% responded that 'all four skills; reading, writing, listening, and speaking' should be enhanced for working purposes, followed by 'speaking skills only' with the score of 36.3%. As suggested by Mridha and Muniruzzaman (2020), speaking skill is the most important skill to be improved by the learners as it is the main requirement in corporate sector.

Overall, it can be assumed that most of the participants portrayed positive perceptions and acceptance towards the use of the English language at their workplace and they generally understood its importance in relation to their job scopes. They also agreed that all four language skills, especially speaking should be improved. The findings for this part are displayed in Table 7 below.

Table 7: The Staff's Perceptions on The Use of English as A Means of Communication and The Skill to be Improved at The Workplace
Item 5: Do you want to take any English proficiency classes provided by the employer?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	79	77.5	77.5	77.5
	No	23	22.5	22.5	100.0
	Total	102	100.0	100.0	

Item 6: If you are being offered to attend any English classes at your workplace, what kind of language skill do you want to improve the most?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Listening	4	3.9	3.9	3.9
	Speaking	37	36.3	36.3	40.2
	Reading	3	2.9	2.9	43.1
	Writing	6	5.9	5.9	49.0
	All skills	52	51.0	51.0	100.0
	Total	102	100.0	100.0	

Item 7: Do you personally think English is important in your job scope?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	88	86.3	86.3	86.3
	No	14	13.7	13.7	100.0
	Total	102	100.0	100.0	

IV. CONCLUSION

The present study uncovers some contributing factors influencing the administrative staffs' readiness to communicate in English at their workplace. Findings from this study agree that the main contributing factors are psychological, environmental, and proficiency aspects. The findings extracted from participants' responses to the questionnaire suggested that psychological aspects are the most significant contributor that determines their readiness to communicate in English, followed by environmental and proficiency.

This mini research on factors contributing to staff's readiness to communicate in English is not an extensive study which cannot be generalized in other settings or target groups. One of the significant limitations is that the target participants were only selected from one tertiary institution. The focal point of this study is only to probe into the possible factors that might affect their readiness to speak in English, especially at the workplace. The other significant drawback is that the study was not completed in-depth, which could have been accomplished by integrating an observational study or an interview session with the participants.

It is recommended that extensive research be conducted to elucidate the psychological aspects affecting participants' readiness, emphasising the anxiety dimension. By doing so, such research can provide richer data sets that include both generalisable and contextually specific information. Furthermore, the stakeholders will also be able to utilise this data in preparing suitable courses that meet their needs in enhancing English language proficiency.

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