

English Language Needs among Services Sector Employees in Malaysia's New Norm

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Abstract

English proficiency is necessary for workplace communication. Working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic means employees require more than good technical skills. They also require language skills for effective communication. The level of English proficiency may not meet the benchmarks established by the employers to be considered sufficient for effective workplace communication, thus, the objective of this paper is to explore English language needs among employees working in the services sector in Malaysia. To obtain this data, participants working in 12 areas of the services sector filled in a needs analysis questionnaire. Descriptive statistics (SPSS version 26) analysed the language skills that were most important to employees which were categorized under three main constructs namely, 'necessities', 'lacks' and 'wants.' Overall findings revealed that the two major language skills employees perceived they needed to improve on the most were speaking and reading. From the results, it is proposed that future researches sample a larger number of participants and apply a mixed method approach for a more in-depth study. Furthermore, the findings have implications for curriculum developers, subject specialists, educators and the services sector.

Keywords: English Proficiency, Covid-19, Language Skills, Services Sector, Needs Analysis, Necessities, Lacks, Wants

Introduction

Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, the working world has changed and the majority are now remotely working from home. Subsequently, English has become more important as the new norm of communication now takes place in the digital form. According to Chaudhary (2020), with the rush in digitization due to Covid-19, there will be more jobs that will need the knowledge of working English. Effective communication skills in the English language are growing in demand and will continue to rise in the future (Hee & Zainal, 2018; Krishnan et al., 2019). In 2013, the Ministry of Education Malaysia developed the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 to target specific skills and attributes needed for Malaysian youth to compete and thrive in the globalised 21st century economy. One of the targeted attributes is to be 'bilingually proficient' whereby every student who leaves school should be able to perform in a dual language environment by being 'operationally proficient' in both Bahasa Malaysia and English. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) defines 'operational proficiency' as the linguistic fluency necessary to be acquired by an individual to be fully competent in professional and academic life. For today's generation of workers to thrive and compete in the current working sector global economy, language needs should be addressed from the grassroots level to achieve the expected level of 'operational proficiency.' Poor English proficiency among fresh graduates was ranked as one of the top five issues faced by Malaysian employers since 2006 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). When the industry engages with local universities, they request academics to train students to be equipped with updated skills that will help them thrive in the organizations hiring them. Although numerous research of needs analysis in the workplace have been previously conducted to identify the problems of language skills that workers need to improve on, ongoing local research should be continuously conducted to provide information to institutions of education on the most current and relevant language skills that need to be taught to their students to better prepare them for the future. The main purpose of this study is to identify the English language necessities, lacks and wants of services sector employees in Malaysia that will provide useful information to stakeholders and key players involved in improving the education system in view of the new norm of online teaching and working. The following are the research questions this study aims to identify:

1. What are the lacks of the respondents in workplace English skills?
2. What are the needs of the respondents in workplace English skills?
3. What are the wants of the respondents in workplace English skills?

Literature Review

English Needs and Skills in the Workplace

The most commonly needed language skill in workplace settings is communication skills (Kassim & Ali, 2010). It is used as the prime medium especially in dealing with outsiders or clients and is very needed to build networking and connections. A study done in Malaysia revealed a group of employers' agreements on the importance of English, more so than Malay, in communicating and giving instructions (Sarudin et al., 2013). This proves it to be similarly important as the core skills and has also become the key indicator of a proficient potential employee observed during job interviews. Another study done in 2018 discovered that English communication skill is indeed needed in the workplace especially to 'communicate to others effectively through emails, group discussions, presentations etc.'

(Clement & Murugavel, 2018). Hence, the present study has confidence that this age-old issue has been widely discussed by many researchers before. However, a study done by Tengku Shahrana (2016) found that communication skills are not much needed, but instead, the focus is on listening and reading skills. In addition, in Singh and Harun (2019), interns working in various sectors in the industry ranging from business, communication to transportation and many others, reported that English listening, speaking and reading skills were the top three skills highly in need in their respective fields in regards with English language. Therefore, we believe that reading, listening and speaking English is somewhat demanding in occupational as well as social undertakings at the workplace, rendering the need for better language courses for working individuals. Aside from the skills mentioned, Tevdovska (2017) states that potential employees should also be equipped with English skills in the writing aspect to fulfil the needs at work that involves curation of written content. Writing falls closely next to communication skill as it is a mainly used skill while working and workers are expected to produce writings such as minutes of meetings and memoranda (Kassim & Ali, 2010). Technical and professional writing are simple tools created to complete a job, and that is to deliver information to those who need it. It is meant to be clear cut and effective (Ewald, 2017). Clearer pieces of writing will be perceived and understood better and most employers expect their employees to possess a similar level of competency in writing as native English speakers (Hoare & Hu, 2015).

If these needs are not being taken into consideration, we believe that working individuals might miss out on opportunities to improve their skills, develop confidence, increase greater sense of involvement at work while employers might lose out on increased profitability and productivity due to less than sufficient language skills.

ESP

ESP stands for English for Specific Purposes (ESP, henceforth), and it is defined as the function of English in any language courses whereby their aims are specifically designed for a particular group of students, based on their needs (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). In the context of this study, ESP is rooted from the needs of the employees, the courses will then be created and go through on-going analysis on what the employees need based on their job scope. Different positions or job scope will demand different language skills. This fits well with the word in the title 'Purposes' as the direction of the course is aligned to fill in that specific purpose or context. The table below further illustrates previous research done in the favour of ESP.

Researcher	Context of ESP	Language Skills Identified
Glomo-Narzoles et al (2021)	Workplace English Language Needs & Pedagogical Implications in ESP	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Speaking is the most often used language skill in the workplace. 2. Listening problems such as accents, pronunciations, slang and idiomatic expressions 3. Speaking problems such as pronunciations, lack of confidence and grammar

		4. Reading problems such as difficult to understand technical terms.
Clarice (2019)	Long-term Workplace Communication Needs of Business Professionals.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Professionals of different positions use English for different job scope and frequencies. 2. Emails, minutes and socializing are difficult for some employees.
Hiranburana (2017)	Business Discourse in English	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use more written English (email) than spoken English as the medium of communication. 2. Reading and writing are the two most essential skills.
Kim & Yoo (2014)	Sports English Education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communication skills for networking (e.g., sports exchange program, sports diplomacy) 2. Future career and job-related language skills

Better analysis of the social contexts and expectations in the needs of workplaces will help the employers and the employees to determine what language skills are needed and which part of the language demands the most. This analysis, which is termed as 'Needs Analysis', is known to be an essential part of ESP course development (Brown, 2016). With the analysis, the employers can conduct specific training to help their employees fulfill the requirements of certain positions or job scope.

Target Situation Analysis (TSA)

Needs analysis (NA, henceforth) plays a crucial function in the development of any language program regardless of ESP (Munby, 1978; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). NA can be defined as gathering information as the starting point of the development of course syllabus created to cater the needs of specific groups of students (Iwai et. Al, 1999). It is a method for categorizing objectives and instructions to facilitate students' learning in an environment resembling real-life circumstances of the learners. There are two parts of NA that will be briefly explained; Target Situation Analysis (TSA, henceforth) and Learning Needs Analysis (LNA, henceforth). TSA determines what students need to be able to do in English as a result of the course while LSA identifies the gap between the existing knowledge, abilities and wants of the learners. Figure 1 below is a framework of TSA and LNA combined to design a language curriculum.

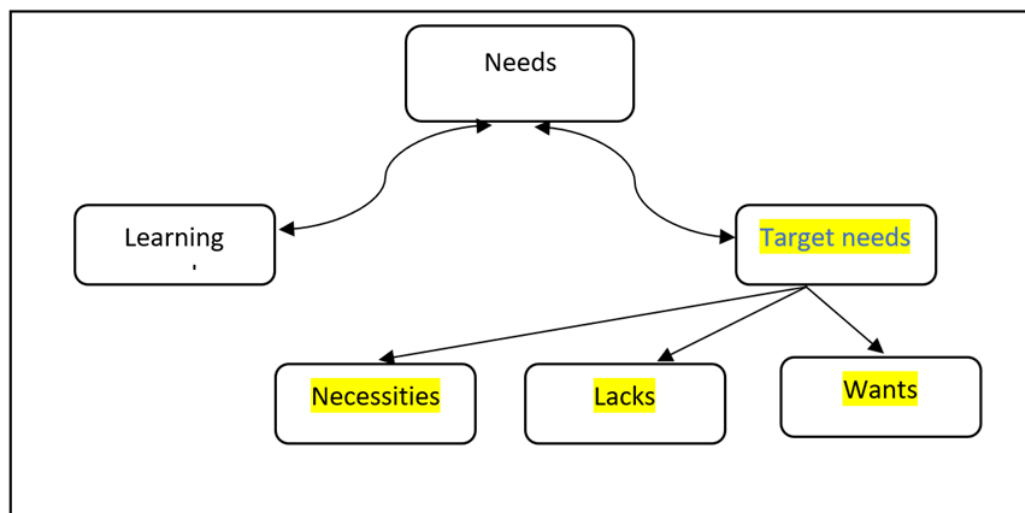


Figure 1

Kandil (2003) Needs Analysis framework

Needs Analysis Taxonomies

Under the general heading of needs, Hutchinson, and Waters (1987) identify the following divisions.

Target Needs is an umbrella term that conceals some vital characteristics. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) look at the target situation in terms of necessities, lacks and wants as:

- a) **Necessities** refer to the type of needs determined by the learners' demands of the target situation i.e. what the learners must know to function effectively in the target situation.
- b) **Lacks** refers to the void left after taking account of what the learners know prior to enrolling in the learning process. This will help to decide which of the necessities the learners lack.
- c) **Wants** refers to learners' views of the reasons why they need the language. It should not be ignored as learners possess a clear understanding of the necessities of the target situation and have a certain view of the lacks they have. However, this might be a problem as the learners' perception might be contradictory to the views of other stakeholders such as the course designer and the language instructor or ESP teacher.

Learning Needs outlines how students progress from their starting point (lacks) to the destination (necessities). It is unwise to construct a course that only focuses on the target objectives (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

The current study believes that a comprehensive NA is pivotal in investigating learners' needs in the target situation i.e. their workplace. Learners' wants and their views about the rationale on why they need language should not be disregarded as well as it determines the learners' motivation in the learning process.

Methodology

In order to address the research questions, a quantitative study was carried out in services sector workplaces. The services sector comprises of 1) wholesale and retail trade, food and beverages, and accommodation, 2) information and communication and, transportation and storage, 3) health, education and arts, entertainment and recreation, and 4) professional and real estate agent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). A 49-question

survey regarding the workforces' requirements to use English for task fulfilment in the workplace was constructed in six sections. The first section of the survey required the respondents to choose their demographic details (age, level of education and first language), state their field of work, and answer two questions on the use of English in their workplace. The second section required respondents to rate their English proficiency level in 9 questions. The options were classified for each construct separately into a five-point Likert scale of possible answers 1= poor, 2= fair, 3= average, 4= good and 5= excellent.

In the following sections, the respondents had to rate the needs of individual English language skills, namely speaking, reading, writing and listening using the Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1= never, 5= always). The data was analysed descriptively, using means and standard deviation with Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. The nonparametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to compare opinions on face-to-face and online learning. The Chi-square and Mann-Whitney tests were used to compare answers between less and more advanced students. $P < .05$ was considered statistically significant.

Data Analysis

The respondents were randomly selected from 12 areas of the services sector to answer the questionnaire. In total, 51 respondents answered the questionnaire thoroughly.

Table 1

Gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	21	41.2	41.2	41.2
Female	30	58.8	58.8	100.0
Total	51	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 Demonstrates that, in total, 51 respondents answered the questions, of which 41.2% (21) were males, while 58.8% (30) were females.

Table 2

Age categories

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
18-25	3	5.9	5.9	5.9
26-35	28	54.9	54.9	60.8
36-45	20	39.2	39.2	100.0
Total	51	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 indicates that the respondents are divided into three age categories: 18-25, 26-35, and 36-45 with the percentage and frequency of 5.9% (3), 54.9% (28), and 39.2% (20), respectively. In terms of the education level of respondents, the respondents have different

education levels: SPM, Diploma, Bachelor, Master, and PhD with the percentage and frequency of 13.7% (7), 15.7% (8), 47.1% (24), 17.6 (9), 5.9% (3), respectively. It is shown that Bachelor's degree holders comprise the highest percentage of respondents (47.1%), while the lowest percentage belongs to respondents with PhD degrees (5.9%).

Based on the survey, 82% (42) of the part are interested in participating in a English course if offered while 17.6% (9) are reluctant to do so. It is indicated that the mean of their daily use of English is 3.31 out of 5.

Necessities

In the present study, necessities are explored as the workforces' demands of the ideal workplace proficiency level (the target situation) or what they must acquire to function effectively in the workplace.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of listening requirement

	Mean	SD
I need to listen to work presentations.	3.78	1.045
I need to listen to online meetings/teleconferences.	3.24	1.142
I need to listen to work updates.	3.92	.997
I need to listen to spoken instructions/advice.	3.80	.980
I need to listen to seminars/conferences.	3.39	1.002
I need to listen to instructions given by superiors.	4.10	1.063
I need to deal with clients/customers' object	3.49	1.271
Valid N (listwise)		

Table 3 demonstrates the necessities for listening skill among respondents. It is shown that the highest mean and SD (4.10, 1.063) belongs to the item 'need to listen to instructions given by superiors', while the lowest mean value is related to the item 'I need to listen to online meeting/teleconferences' (3.24, 1.142). Understanding superiors' instructions is crucial to the employees' function. However, although they are working from home through the internet, they perceive the need to listen to online meetings/teleconferences as the least necessary.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of reading requirement

	Mean	SD
I need to read emails.	4.43	.878
I need to read office documents.	4.22	.945
I need to read project documents.	3.94	1.028
I need to read reports/data /statistics.	4.02	.990
I need to read professional texts.	3.86	1.059
I need to read Standard Operating Procedures.	3.94	1.008
I need to deal with clients/customers' object	3.49	1.271
I need to analyse reports, contracts and charts.	3.59	1.252
I need to have critical reading skills (to answer questions/resolve issues).	3.82	1.053
I need to skim reading materials (search for main ideas).	3.90	1.025
Valid N (listwise)		

Table 4 illustrates the necessities for reading skills among the subjects. It is indicated that the highest mean score belongs to the item 'need to read emails' with mean and SD (4.43, .878), while the lowest mean value is related to the item 'need to deal with clients/customers' object' (3.49, 1.271). Reading emails is the most important reading task for them. However, dealing with clients/customers' objects may not involve reading much text for them.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics of speaking requirement

	Mean	SD
I need to communicate with visitors visiting the worksite.	3.57	1.153
I need to give oral presentations.	3.20	1.281
I need to participate effectively in group discussions.	3.49	1.138
I need to do face-to-face negotiations.	3.61	1.218
I need to do teleconferencing.	2.86	1.184
I need to discuss how to solve work-related problems.	3.53	1.084
Valid N (listwise)		

Table 5 demonstrates the necessities for speaking skills among the respondents. It is shown that the item 'need to do face-to-face negotiations' has the highest mean score and SD (3.61, 1.218). In order to communicate and function more effectively in the workplace, employees need to be able to negotiate well. The item 'need to do teleconferencing' has the lowest mean value and SD (2.86, 1.184). The justification might be that they are not accustomed to online working, working from home or online negotiation is still new to them.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics of writing requirement

	Mean	SD
I need to write reports.	3.69	1.104
I need to write e-mails.	4.08	1.074
I need to write memos.	3.61	1.185
I need to write meeting minutes.	2.98	1.257
I need to write project proposals.	3.14	1.281
I need to write letters.	2.92	1.246
Valid N (listwise)		

Table 6 shows the necessities for writing skills among the study subjects. It is shown that the item 'need to write an email' has the highest mean value and SD (4.08, 1.074), while the item 'need to write letters' has the lowest mean score (2.92, 1.246). The highest priority to writing emails may be that writing email is the main communication tool among or/and within sectors.

Lacks

In the present study, the exploration of lack of language skills took into account the workforces' knowledge before enrolling at the worksite. The reflection on the lacks will help determine which of the necessities they lack.

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics of self-rating/lack

	Mean	SD
I rate my English Skills in speaking as	3.10	.878
I rate my English Skills in listening as	3.37	.958
I rate my English Skills in reading as	3.65	.976
I rate my English Skills in writing as	3.14	.849

Table 7 illustrates the lack of language skills based on respondents' self-rating. It is indicated that the reading skill has the highest mean (3.65, .976), followed by listening skill (3.37, .958), and writing skill (3.14, .849), while the lowest mean belongs to speaking skill (3.10, .878). It is observed that reading and listening as receptive skills need more improvement.

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics of overall level

	Mean	SD
In my opinion, my overall English language proficiency is	3.22	.856

Table 8 demonstrates the overall level of language proficiency of respondents based on the scale of (1-5). It is indicated that the overall mean is (3.22, .856), which is far from satisfactory.

Wants

The exploration on the 'wants' in the study focuses on the workforces' views on the reasons for learning the language. It is a crucial aspect to highlight the respondents' understanding of the requirement or the necessities of the target situation and makes them reflect on their lacks.

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics of want

	Mean	SD
I need to improve my English in speaking	3.43	.700
I need to improve my English in listening	3.20	.749
I need to improve my English in reading	3.24	.681
I need to improve my English in writing	3.37	.692

Table 9 demonstrates the descriptive statistics of the construct 'wants' in terms of mean and SD. It is shown that improvement in speaking, with mean and SD (3.43, .700) is the highest, followed by improvement in writing (3.37, .692), and improvement in reading (3.24, .681), while the least mean score belongs to improvement in listening (3.20, .749). As 'wants' refers to learners' views of the reasons why they need the language, it is shown that all skills, with subtle differences in mean value, need to be improved to meet the language proficiency requirement.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to explore the English language needs of Malaysian employees working in 12 areas of the services sector. The study examined three elements of needs analysis necessities, wants and lacks based on a framework by Kandil (2003). The findings indicate that the necessity for language ability to function more effectively in the workplace is an overall high. The 'lacks' (representing the void in language proficiency) and 'wants' (the reason why they need the language) obtained approximately similar mean values with the all items scores falling in the 3+ mean values.

This research was novel in the new norm era with interesting findings. However, the study has some limitations. This is a small-scale study involving only 51 service employees. A study with a larger number of respondents might be of interest to verify or contradict the

findings of this study. A mixed method study may be recommended to bring the qualitative data as well and deepen our understanding of the issue.

The findings have implications for curriculum developers, subject specialists, educators and the services sector. Curriculum developers must be aware of the significance of language skills in the future job market. It should be in line with Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 where language proficiency in both English and Malay is emphasized. They may need to revisit and rectify the curriculum in view of the new norm of online teaching and working. In addition, ESP subject specialists and educators need to be aware of the significance of language proficiency development of students and know how to deal with their language deficiency considering the new norms. Finally, the services sector needs to be aware of the importance of language skills of their staff in the new norm and up-skill them through training workshops, webinars, seminars, conferences, and other similar build-up programs.

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