

## **Preferences or Requirements: Investigating Administrative Staff English Usage at Public Tertiary Institutions**

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**Abstract:** The competency to use the English language in Malaysian tertiary education sectors is not solely required for pedagogical and research purposes. The language is also indispensable to administrative staff in the institutions to administer and spearhead the country's education sector towards achieving world-class recognition. Yet, much literature is needed to highlight the importance of the language for administrative staff working at tertiary institutions. This study aims to investigate administrative staff at tertiary institutions' usage of English language at the workplace. A mixed-method design was used to answer the what and how the staff uses the language. 138 administrative staff of several public tertiary institutions in Malaysia responded to an online questionnaire, and 10 were interviewed during a competency workshop. The survey and interview data generally indicated the administrative staff's agreement on the importance of English language. In addition, most staff prefer to use the language during the telephone conversation. Still, they prefer to use it only when required, particularly in conversing with foreign counterparts. Albeit the preference, they were optimistic about the requirement set by institutions to be competent in the English language for workplace communication. These results are significant in understanding the administrative staff's issues on the English language usage at the workplace and in enhancing the required competency as part of CPD.

**Keywords:** administrative staff, language usage, workplace, competency

## INTRODUCTION

English language is being considered to be one of the critical languages used within the Malaysian workplace. Alongside Malay, which is the official language of Malaysia, English plays the role of the medium of communication in the Malaysian private and government sector (Kassim & Ali, 2010). Most employers require their employees to have good English language skills to communicate effectively with their respective stakeholders.

Besides being used as a communication medium in business and economic sectors, English also holds a significant status within the tertiary education sectors. English language serves as the primary medium of communication in most private universities and colleges in Malaysia. English language in tertiary institutions is one of the internationalization strategies taken by the top management of many tertiary institutions to attract more international students and prepare Malaysian graduates for the global workforce (Dewi & Indrayani, 2018). In addition, English language competency is deemed very important within public universities due to its usage in publication, research, and medium of instruction.

The use of English language in Malaysian tertiary institutions involves academic and administrative fields. As part of the internationalization strategy of tertiary institutions, the influx of international students requires administrative staff to master English language to cater to the students' needs. Hence, the administrative staff, the officers, and support staff at the university offices need to converse reasonably well in English to be viewed as effective (Hidayah, 2014). The administrative staff who can speak and write in English proficiently will help to uphold international students' matters and administrative tasks.

Eventually, the domain of requirements and preference of English language at the workplace by administrative staff overlap one over another. With almost eleven years of English language learning at primary, secondary, and tertiary education, most administrative staff have an average level of English language competency (Che Hassan & Ong Lok Tik, 2019). Administrative staff daily need to engage with international students or staff, which require them to communicate in English. Several tasks mainly require staff to use English fully, such as conversations with international staff and students, sending and replying to emails from foreign stakeholders, preparing presentations related to research and publication, and other tasks. All these tasks require administrative staff to use English comfortably based on the general view.

In understanding the English language preference at the workplace, it is understandable that most administrative staff prefer to use the Malay language since Malay is the official language (Ting, 2002). They prefer to use Malay mainly at the workplace as it is their mother tongue, and they can communicate effectively compared to using other languages. The language is considered the "language of wider communication" in Peninsular Malaysia due to a large number of Malay ethnic (Ting, 2002, p.145). Thus, administrative staff mostly prefer to use Malay language at their workplace.

Over the years, there have been many studies done toward exploring English usage at Malaysian workplace (Abdul Jalal T., 2016; Che Hassan & Ong Lok Tik, 2019; Hamidun et al., 2017; Kassim & Ali, 2010; Lee & Koo, 2015; Muthiah, 2003; Nur Ehsan & Sadiyah, 2011; Ong et al., 2011; Yusuf et al., 2020). However, most studies that had been done focus more on future graduates' competency in English at the workplace (Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012; Pandian & Balraj Baboo, 2013; Sarudin et al., 2013; Shahariah Saleh & Murtaza, 2018).

The use of English by Malaysian public universities administrative staff has been unrecognized in the English for Specific Purpose (ESP) literature. To date, only a few studies have been done to explore English use among administrative staff in Malaysian public universities (Hidayah, 2014; Jassim, 2020; Jusoh et al., 2018). Generally, administrative staff who join the public universities with the English language skills they had learned during their primary, secondary, and tertiary education used English as the medium for communication at the workplace besides Malay, the official language in Malaysian tertiary education.

Hence, the use of English by administrative staff in Malaysian public universities needs to be explored. The focus should be on their perceptions of English language as a medium of communication at the workplace. Understanding how administrative staff perceives English usage can improve their language proficiency and skills through training by examining this issue. The current study investigates the English language preference and requirements by administrative staff at Malaysian public tertiary institutions workplaces. The following research questions were formulated to assist the objective;

1. Do administrative staff in public universities require English language communication skills?
2. Which communicative events do the staff use English the most?
3. Do administrative staff at public universities feel apprehensive about using English at the workplace?
4. What are administrative staff reasons for using or not using English at the workplace?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Need analysis is an approach to solving specific problems, recognizing subject wants and suggesting methods to those particular problems (Frey et al., 2000). Additionally, need analysis is an information-gathering process involving techniques and procedures used in designing syllabus (Nunan, 1988). Needs analysis needs to be treated as a continuous activity as people will constantly change, and their needs will change over time (Shahariah Saleh & Murtaza, 2018). The primary purpose of conducting a need analysis study is to determine the requirements, conditions and wants related to the English language used as a communication (Abdul Jalal, 2016). Those answers can help management look for appropriate measures to improve their employee language competency. A well-versed staff will, in turn, contribute to the institutions' competitive advantage in the global higher education sector.

In exploring English use in the workplace, researchers in Jakarta investigated 139 respondents on their perception of English language requirements. The study concluded that respondents agreed that "English language abilities provide a competitive advantage in the workplace" for the employees as English is a business lingua franca (Talaue & Kim, 2020, p. 331). Furthermore, most respondents agreed on the high level of English usage at the workplace, and additionally, most of them perceived that they were proficient and very proficient in English language (Talaue & Kim, 2020). Talaue and Kim (2020) claimed the respondents' high level of reported proficiency was related to the English medium of instruction used in university.

To investigate the issues of English usage among administrative staff and their perception of English language in the workplace, Jassim (2020) conducted mixed-method research using surveys and interviews toward administrative staff and international students of a specific

Malaysian university (Jassim, 2020). The researcher collected the data for the study using an online survey to get an insight into administrative staffs' English language usage at a workplace for international communication. Later, the researcher interviewed seven administrative staff pertaining their view on English courses. In addition, the researcher interviewed international students to get their evaluation toward administrative staff's use of English for communication. The results indicated that English was the preferred language used for communication both by administrative staff and international students at the workplace and the need for administrative staff to have opportunities to practice their English conversation skills.

A study by Jusoh et al. (2018) explained the communication apprehension issue among administrative staff in a Malaysian public university (Jusoh et al., 2018). The study mainly used PRCA-24 as the main instrument to determine communication apprehension among 150 administrative staff from various departments. The results indicated that administrative staff showed a reasonable apprehension when using English at the workplace, and female staff tends to be more apprehensive in four communication settings (Jusoh et al., 2018). The study concluded that the apprehension level experienced by administrative staff was heavily influenced by the nature of communication, such as the more formal communication setting is, administrative staff will experience a higher level of apprehension using English.

A study by Abdullah et al. (2017) also explores the English language needs among government staff in Malaysian's Islamic Institution (Abdullah et al., 2017). The study was conducted using a quantitative method involving teams from three Islamic Institutions in Malaysia. The data from the questionnaire were analysed using the Kruskal-Wallis H, focusing on finding out the significant differences of English language needs among variables of the study. The results carried out on three Islamic institutions revealed the respondents' agreement on the need for English language at the workplace to communicate with various people from various industries (Abdullah et al., 2017). The results implicated the need for ESP course developers to upgrade the existing course curriculum to ensure graduates enter employment sectors, particularly for Islamic institutions. The study involved administrative staff, especially officers from selected government institutions, whereas the present study is conducted toward administrative staff in public tertiary institutions.

In the same context of exploring English need analysis in the Malaysian workplace, Abdul Jalal (2016) reported that most employees used English at a substantial level in which English is used to communicate and interact among them throughout and beyond the organization. The study was conducted toward 50 respondents from higher management levels from various industries in Malaysia, with the majority of the respondents aged between 43 and 52 years old. The study addressed the lack, needs, and wants related to English communication at the workplace. The respondents in the survey pointed out their lack of English language skills, mainly listening and reading skills. They expressed their frequent need to use English, especially writing emails, reports, and letters. To add, the respondents highlighted their wants in enhancing their English vocabulary, speaking skills, and pronunciation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

The present study employs a mixed-method research design, specifically a sequential research approach to collect its data (Creswell, 2014). The study starts with the collection and analysis of quantitative data in answering the research questions formulated earlier. The purpose of using the quantitative approach in this study is to use the statistical tool to provide answers to the research questions that are time-saving and resourceful in discussing the study's findings (Daniel, 2016). At the beginning of the study's data collection, the quantitative investigation was carried out on the administrative staff of Malaysian tertiary institutions. Then, it was followed by the second phase, where the collection of qualitative data happens. As the qualitative data is collected during this phase, it is also analysed to answer research questions. The data was analysed by transcribed, coded, and thematically.

### **Participants**

The participants of the study are administrative staff from tertiary institutions in Malaysia. All participants were chosen based on the convenience sampling method. The rationale for using the sampling method was that the participants are readily available to participate in the study and easily accessible for the researcher to reach them (Etikan et al., 2016). 138 administrative staff were involved in this study after the Google form link was given to them, asking their response toward the formulated survey items. The participants were selected from several public universities, including UMK, UMT, UMP, UNiSZA, and UiTM.

### **Survey**

A structured close-ended questionnaire is used as the first research instrument for the study. The use of this type of questionnaire is to assist the respondents in giving responses for the later part of the study. There are eleven (11) items design in this instrument. Five (5) items require participants to choose between yes and no concerning English usage at the workplace. One (1) items require participants to rate their current English communication skills based on five (5) scales-range of Very Good to Very Poor. Another five (5) items in this questionnaire ask participants to rate their English communication frequency based on selected communicative events (Meeting, Group Discussion, Public Speaking, Telephone conversation, and Daily conversation). The Likert scale was employed for these five items on frequency. In terms of reliability of the items in the questionnaire, the Cronbach alpha score obtained was 0.78. The score indicates a good range of internal consistency of the items formulated in the questionnaire (Taber, 2018). Also, a senior lecturer was appointed to review and evaluate the instrument's questions to measure the validity of the instrument. The feedback is on the consistency of questions and responses and the purpose of each question toward answering the intended research questions.

## Interview

The interview was conducted at the beginning of an online English training course. Ten participants agreed to be interviewed and gave their consents to the researcher. The interview session was conducted by an English language teacher who acted as the moderator and the researcher as the observer. The interview was recorded using the Google Meet platform, and the session took approximately half an hour.

## Data collection and analysis

Data collection procedures began by requesting consent from administrative staff to participate in the study. They were also informed that their participation in the survey was voluntary. The questionnaire was distributed via the Google Form link to administrative staff working at public universities. The link was distributed using Google mail and WhatsApp messenger. Although the use of those chosen mediums can reach a large population of administrative staff, many were unable to participate in the study due to their working commitment. The researcher downloaded the responses from the questionnaire in an Excel type file. As a preliminary checking, all data gathered was double-check in confirming that they responded to all the items.

For the interviews, ten participants were selected at the beginning of an English training course conducted by the Human Resource Development Department. The training was conducted by an English language teacher from the English department, and for the interviews, the researcher acted as an observer. The sessions were recorded using the Google Meet platform and then uploaded into Google Drive.

After the quantitative data was collected from participants, their responses were converted into scores using SPSS software version 26. The data were then analyzed using descriptive statistics in mean scores, standard deviation, percentage, and frequency. The qualitative data from the interviews were also transcribed and coded. Then, the data were thematically analysed.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented in two subsections. The first is the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire to answer RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3. The latter is the qualitative one for the final RQ of the study.

### English Frequency and Usage at the workplace

Research Question 1: Do English language require in public university?

*Table 1 English requirement at workplace*

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	85	61.6
No	53	38.4
Total	138	100.0

Table 1 shows the frequency of staffs' perception of the English communication skill requirement at their workplace. The data was collected from administrative staff in several Malaysian public universities ( $n = 138$ ). 62 percent of the respondents agreed that their job requires them to have good English language communication skills. Another 38 percent indicate that their position did not need them to have good English skills.

*Table 2 Malay language preference at workplace*

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	132	95.7
No	6	4.3
Total	138	100.0

Table 2 shows the percentage of staff preference in using the Malay language at the workplace. The majority of the participants (95.7 percent) preferred to use Malay at the workplace, while only 4.3 percent did not choose to use Malay.

*Table 3 English communication skill self-rating*

	Mean	Std. Deviation
My English communication skills is	3.28	0.59

The descriptive statistics in Table 3 shows that the mean score on staff perception about their English communication skill was 3.28 (SD = 0.59). The result indicated that overall, public university administrative staff rate their English communication skills on average.

Research Question 2: Which communicative events do English used the most?

*Table 4 English usage based on communicative events at workplace*

Communicative Events	Mean	Std. Deviation
During Meeting	2.66	0.91
During group discussion	2.61	0.92
Public speaking	2.65	0.95
Telephone conversation	2.80	0.83
Daily conversation	2.51	0.88

Table 4 presents the tasks or occasions the respondents use English. The most were during telephone conversations, with a mean score of 2.80. Another workplace communicative event where staff mostly used English was during meetings with a mean score of 2.66. The mean score for English usage in public speaking was 2.65, while during group discussions was 2.61. In contrast, the least mean score was reported by daily conversation with only 2.51.

Research Question 3: Do administrative staff at public universities feel apprehensive about using English at workplace?

*Table 5 Communication avoidance to foreign staff/ students in English*

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	26	18.8
No	112	81.2
Total	138	100.0

Table 5 demonstrates the respondents' perception of the need to communicate with foreign staff or students who use English. The majority of the respondents (81.2%) admitted that they did not avoid communicating with foreign staff or students. Only 18.8 percent of the respondents reported 'yes' in avoiding using the language.

*Table 6 Workplace Communication Apprehensive*

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	38	27.5
No	100	72.5
Total	138	100.0

In table 6, the majority of the respondents (72.5%) mentioned that they did not seem afraid or felt anxiety when communicating in English at the workplace. Only 27.5 percent of the respondents felt apprehensive when speaking in English at the workplace.

*Table 7 Supervisor/Superior satisfaction on English proficiency level*

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	90	65.2
No	48	34.8
Total	138	100.0

Table 7 shows the majority of the respondents (65.2%) claimed that their supervisors or superiors were satisfied with their communication. However, there is still 34.8 percent who felt that their bosses were not confident with their current English proficiency level.

### **Preference or Requirement to Use English at the workplace**

In analyzing the interview data, several themes emerged which will be discussed as follows. These themes were arranged according to the interviews question and provide insights toward answering the final research question.



Research Question 4: What are administrative staff reasons for using or not using English at workplace?

*Table 8 Respondents' transcript*

Interview Questions	Theme	Respondents' Transcripts
What do you guys think of your own English? Problem with your English?	Fluency	"not very fluent" "I think I can understand but when I need to talk back, I can not use, a very fluent word. I think it is not enough for officer" "poor" "not so good" "Using a lot of broken English"
	Confident	"We feel we can not speak and we scare..when we speak people laugh at us" "I think I am not confident to speak..but I will try" "The nature of the works. Nature that not,..not require us to speak in English..we use Malay"
	Vocabulary	"lack of vocabulary" "I am translating from malay to English..in my head"
	Grammar	"word selection to suit with the event" " I have problem with my grammar"
Why are you here today in this English training course?	Building Confidence	"to build up confidence" "to be more comfortable to speak with each other" "to be confident"
	Improving Language skills	"to improve English" "to enhance" "I like to learn how to use English correctly"
What aspect of English do you like to refresh in the course for the future?	Grammar	"about grammar" "about tenses" "teach us simple tense..basic" "simple tips and trick in using English"
	English for specific purpose	"incorporated games" "training hands on" "real situation" "report writing in English"

Table 8 has the themes from the transcribed interview data. The themes are coded according to the participants' reasons for their lack of preference to use English at their workplace. The identified themes are fluency, confidence, vocabulary, and grammar. Most respondents perceived their English as not fluent, which has prompted them not to use it at the workplace. That leads to the reason for most of the respondents to join the course. They were hopeful that their attendance at the competency course could help them build confidence and improve their English language skills. They also highlighted English grammar as the central aspect that needs improvement.

The study aims to investigate administrative staff at tertiary institutions' usage of English language at the workplace. The results showed interesting insights about the staff's preference for using English in the tertiary institution contexts. It was found that most staff perceived English as

a required language at the workplace. One of the reasons behind this is that tertiary institutions are fully embracing globalization, in which English is regarded as the primary medium of communication. As such, administrative staff acknowledges that English language is required to deal with international students and staff (Abdullah, 2014). The findings from this study further highlight the importance of English in government sectors and ties well with previous studies (Abdul Jalal, 2016) wherein they found out that English is used heavily at the workplace. Another study by Abdullah et al. (2017) reported that senior executives in Islamic government sectors showed awareness of the demand for English language in the workplace especially speaking and reading skills. In addition, Sarudin et al. (2013) indicated that most Malaysian employers agreed on the importance of English at the workplace.

Nonetheless, the majority of the staff prefer to use the Malay language at their workplace. One of the main reasons behind their preference of Malay over English language was their lack of fluency in English. The staff claimed that their English is 'poor', 'not so good', 'not very fluent' and used 'a lot of broken English'. The finding is similar to Kluensuwan et al. (2019), who reported that Thailand engineers worried about producing mistakes while speaking English, thus influencing their English language skills. Kassim and Ali (2010) also concurred that staff in the Malaysian engineering sector perceived that they were often faced with difficulty speaking fluently.

In contrast, Jassim (2020) reported that administrative staff are able to use English competently. It can be said that the staff perceived their English language skills are not fluent enough in which prompted them not to use English during communication. However, the result of Jassim's (2020) study showed that international students who dealt with administrative staff reported that despite some difficulties in speaking using English, they were able to communicate successfully in which both parties understood each other effectively.

The findings also suggested that administrative staff perceived their English communication skills are on the average level. This result relates to the staff's preference to use Malay at the workplace. In other words, they did not prefer to use English due to their average proficiency in the language. Muthiah (2003) reported that bank officers' weak command of English communication skills might affect the staff's effectiveness at the workplace. In contrarily, Ting et al. (2017) highlighted the requirement of Malaysian employers who emphasize an excellent mastery of English as the crucial aspect for the organization.

Due to this self-perception toward English skills, most staff aimed to build their confidence and improve their English language skills by attending the English training course. Staff pointed out that they attended English training courses in order "to build up confidence" and "to be more comfortable to speak with each other". Consequently, staff mentioned that they wanted "to improve their English", "to learn how to use English correctly," and "to enhance" their English skills. From the finding, we can see that staff are fully aware of their priority toward improving their English communication skill. They prioritized building their self-confidence to speak in English as it will help to improve their communication skills. Abdul Jalal (2016) asserts that most employees have a strong drive to improve their language skills, particularly speaking and pronunciation.

Regarding communication apprehension at the workplace, most staff were not afraid or experienced anxiety using English in communicating. Most of the staff mentioned that they did not avoid speaking English to foreign staff or students at their workplace. In contrast to findings from Hidayah (2014) and Jusoh et al. (2018), both reported university administrative staff's a reasonable level of apprehension in using English to communicate. Since administrative staff fully

acknowledge that English is a requirement in tertiary institutions, they improve their anxiety and fear in using English to fulfil their jobs. The staff also had more exposure to using English during their secondary and tertiary education, resulting in their confidence in using English to communicate with foreign staff and students.

Additionally, findings from quantitative data showed that most staff used English the most during telephone conversations. During the telephone conversations, the staff needed to inquire about foreign staff or student's information using English language. Kassim and Ali (2010) reported that oral communication skills were used the most during teleconferencing within engineering sectors. Similarly, Che Hassan and Ong Lok Tik (2019) reported that finding out about foreign individuals' information and needs was the most crucial communication in the tourism sector.

## CONCLUSION

The results from this study indicate that even though administrative staff showed keen acceptance toward English requirements at the workplace, it does not mean they prefer to use English. The majority of staff still prefer to use Malay language at the workplace. There is a great need to explore Malay and English language preference in the workplace, especially in tertiary education institutions. The findings also suggested interesting interpretations toward English language use at tertiary institution workplaces. The data presented in the current study provided insights into the relationship between language preference, requirement, and communication apprehension at the workplace. Administrative staff in tertiary institutions did not feel apprehensive even though they have mediocre English communication skills and confidence to communicate using English with foreign staff and students.

This study strongly recommends that tertiary institutions organize continuous professional development programs to ensure that administrative staff enhance English proficiency and improve communication skills. The programs should aim to build staff's confidence in speaking English at the workplace. Notably, the use of English at tertiary institutions should be confined to academic classes as the medium of instruction and need to be extended to other non-academic domains such as meetings, emails, and memos. These contexts are the much-needed platform for administrative staff to be competent in their English communication skills especially speaking and writing.

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