RESEARCH ARTICLE

Role of English language in agricultural organisations [version 1; peer review: 2 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

Background – The importance placed on having good English language proficiency and skills to secure employment in Malaysia is a well-known fact. However, very little is known about the role of the English language in multilingual organisations within the agricultural industry in Malaysia. As such, this study aimed to examine the employees' perception of the use of the English language in a professional context particularly in the Malaysian agricultural and agricultural related sectors.

Methods – A concurrent triangulation design was used to quantitatively evaluate the data. A total of 320 questionnaires from employees of 10 agriculture and agriculture related companies were analysed. Additionally, interviews were also conducted with 10 employers from the human resources department as they provided deep insights into the language matters of the organisations.

Results – The employers and employees agree that English language proficiency has economic value and can play an important role at the workplace, as this skill can influence one's career path in terms of employability and career progression.

Conclusions - From the standpoint of employees, a more insightful idea on the influence of English on career development in the agricultural industry has been obtained. These findings have implications for learning outcomes of students, education system, and policymakers aspiring for the human capital which is needed for Malaysia to become a high income and developed nation.

Keywords

agriculture, workplace communication, Malaysia, English language proficiency, career, employability

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ? ?

	1	2
version 1	?	?
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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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Introduction

The importance, role, and value of language skills in organisations is undeniable, however this concept is still not fully understood in Malaysia. It is important to examine the perception of employees towards the importance of English language in a multilingual work environment with the purpose of employing strategic approaches that can help employees in agricultural organisations to cope with language matters which are unique to these organisations. Furthermore, The National Graduate Employability Blueprint, 2012–2017, highlighted that over 50% of the graduates are below average in terms of competence in subject knowledge, English competency, communication, writing skills, and work attitude (Ministry of Education, 2016). Meanwhile, as English language plays a dominant role in the present globalized world, the perception of the employees was also a reflection of the bottom-up perspective, which can provide understanding of the role and value of this language regarding employability and career progression.

This study has investigated the Malaysian agriculture sector as it is the third engine of economic growth and therefore an important contributor to the economy of this country. In 2019, this sector contributed 7.3% to the Gross domestic product (GDP) amounting to approximately RM99.5 billion Dardak & Tamby (2020). The government has decided to transform the agriculture sector with the implementation of Agriculture Revolution 4.0 (AR 4.0), which will have economic benefits for Malaysians, and it is also driven by big data and digital technology (Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, 2021). Also, Dardak (2020) foresees that there will be an increase in trade agreements with countries globally and regionally that will lead to increased employability in Malaysia. Indeed, Malaysia's effort to advance into a modern, technological savvy, and export-led nation is dependent on strengthening its human capital and competency in the English language (Selvaratnam, 2018). Accordingly, the human capita must be empowered, and they must possess the necessary linguistic skills to support the aims of AR 4.0.

In organisations, language is acknowledged as a facilitator or barrier in areas like communication, collaboration and coordination (Bordia & Bordia, 2014). Marschan *et al.* (1997) showed that organisations need to ensure that not only language is not ignored in the workplace, in fact they should view it as a strategic context. Furthermore, studies have shown that there was a significant effect on the starting salaries of graduates, future potential earnings, changing of residence from rural to urban, and improved labour market performance, for employees with English as their second language (Guo & Sun, 2014. Zhou *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2017). Previous Malaysian studies have focused on the area of English language and employability, nonetheless, what is lacking in this context is a clear understanding of the importance of English language competence within the agricultural workplace and the detrimental effects it can have on career paths of employees. This study examined the perception of both employees and employers towards the role and value of English in the agriculture sector as there is sparse literature in this area.

Methods

Prior to conducting this study ethical approval was obtained from Multimedia University (Ethics Approval Number: EA2502021). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The Data was collected through both questionnaires and interviews from these organisations. In this study, 15 organisations were randomly selected from the Malaysia Agribusiness Directory. All 15 organisations were either involved in agriculture or were in the agricultural related business. However, after contacting the stakeholders, only 10 agreed to take part in the study (Table 1).

After approval was optioned from the managers the questionnaires were distributed (see underlying data) (Bhar & Rafik-Galea, 2021b). From a total of 400 questionnaires that were distributed through email, 320 were returned, representing an 80% return rate. The questions were prepared to investigate language use, employee perception and attitude towards the English language in their respective organisations. Respondents for the survey varied in terms of level of education, age,

Table 1. Organisations that took part in the study.

Number of organisations	Type of business
2	Oil Palm Plantation
4	Food Processing Plant
1	Animal Health Solution Provider
1	Agriculture Biotechnology
2	Fertiliser

hierarchical position, functional background, and language proficiency from excellent to low, as the researchers wanted to incorporate perceptions of a broad range of employees. Frequencies, percentages, and mean scores of the responses were calculated and analysed (see [underlying data](#)) (Bhar & Rafik-Galea, 2021c).

For the qualitative phase, the 10 organisations that were involved in the survey were invited to participate in interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the personnel from the human resource department (see [underlying data](#)) (Bhar & Rafik-Galea, 2021b). The interview data were transcribed, coded, and later categorized into themes.

Results

English language proficiency skills

The findings indicated that at least 80% of the respondents are proficient in the national language which is Malay (speaking and writing) while approximately half of the respondents are proficient in both speaking and writing in English (48%) ([Figure 1](#)).

All the respondents indicated that their proficiency in Malay is much higher than their proficiency in English language. In effect, the education system in Malaysia requires the students to be proficient in both languages, therefore many opportunities and exposure are provided in schools for these individuals to learn and improve English and Malay. However, the results of this study indicate that this educational policy has not been successful because English which is the second language in Malaysia has not been mastered as well as Malay. According to [Azirah \(2020\)](#), the language planning and policy decisions in Malaysia have had the effect of demoting English to only a school subject as there is an urgent need to establish a national identity. With these language policy implementations, it is comprehensible that the general English language capability of most Malaysians would be lower than their ability in Malay. In addition, [Azirah \(2020\)](#) notes that the national language policy has established the importance of Malay in schools.

Language use in the workplace: The role of English language

The importance of spoken and written English and Malay in agricultural organisations has been demonstrated in [Figure 2](#). In written communication, English is perceived as the most important language where the mean score ($M=4.1$) is higher than writing in Malay. Malay is the most important language in listening and spoken communication ($M=3.7$). The dominant role of English in written communication is consistent in workplaces where English is not the native language of its employees ([Lønsmann, 2011](#); [Evans, 2010](#); [Hill & van Zyl, 2002](#)).

All 10 employers in this study emphasised the importance of English competence for employability and career advancement. One employer said:

“We have branches outside Malaysia, so it is necessary for our staff to be able to converse in good English. Our management also expects the employees to be proficient in English as all our internal communication like emails and reports are in English.”

Figure 1. Employees' perception of their English language skills.

Figure 2. Importance of English and Malay in agricultural organisations.

Table 2. Comparison of the perceptions of employees on English in the agricultural industry.

	Perception/attitude	Agree or strongly agree (%)
1	I need to improve my spoken English skills.	94
2	I need to improve my written English skills.	95
3	If I improve my English, I will have better chances of promotion within my organization.	90

Employees' perception on importance of English

Most of the employees showed the aspiration to improve their written and spoken English proficiency, which indicates that they have awareness about the importance of the role that language has in the workplace (Table 2).

Clearly, the employees realise that there is an economic importance attached to English and it is imperative that they have the language competence in order to achieve success in their careers. Additionally, the results of this study have demonstrated that 90% of the employees perceived English language skills as important for getting a promotion. As an employer explains:

“We do a lot of work with our counterparts who are overseas. English is like an international language now and when we hire people, they must be able to speak good English. For example, we must speak English with our business partners in Japan. Also, certain departments need people who speak well because they may need to travel to Europe or other countries. I may need to send someone to manage events in Netherlands as we have a subsidiary there. To do well in their careers, our employees must be proficient in English.”

Discussion

The results of this study have shown that English is the dominant language in the agricultural industry and having a good command of this language is vital as it is widely used in this sector, alongside Malay. With reference to the role of language, the ability to communicate well in English is extremely crucial when it comes to career progression and employability. Conversely, employees with limited language competence may not be able to achieve their desired career progression or even gain employment in the agricultural industry. As such it was important to analyse how competence in English can influence careers or help to gain employment.

Piekkari *et al.* (2015) introduced a fascinating model (Figure 3) which highlighting the influence of language in career paths. The model helps to explain how language has an impact on both employability and career advancement. The language “glass ceiling effect” serves as an invisible barrier preventing employees who lack the necessary English language skills from advancing in their careers. Research conducted on Japanese- owned subsidiaries located in several countries in the world (Wright *et al.*, 2001), foreign owned subsidiaries located in Japan (Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012) and China (Li *et al.*, 2020) support the existence of a language “glass ceiling” in the workplace domain. For example, according to a study conducted by Li *et al.* (2020) Chinese employees’ willingness to accept international assignments was positively related to their English language proficiency.

Figure 3. Language barriers: language ceiling and walls. Source: Adapted from [Piekkari et al. \(2015\)](#).

Similarly, a “language wall” may prevent employees from a horizontal career move. Conversely, the language wall prevents an individual from being hired by employers because they lack the necessary language skills to be able to function efficiently in the organisation. A study on the employability of new graduates has shown how a “language wall” may arise. It showed that 64% of employers expressed that the command of English language in Malaysian graduates was poor which could prevent them from securing a job position ([Fernandez-Chung & Leong, 2018](#)).

Thus, this indicates that if potential employees have a poor command of the language, they may not be hired, and this can affect their employability and their future earning potentials.

Employees may also encounter the “language wall” when planning horizontal career movement. For example, if an employee from the factory floor needs to move to the communications department, the individual may face problems due to language deficiency as the communication department may place a greater importance on English proficiency. [Piekkari et al. \(2015\)](#) cautions that sometimes employees could initiate downward career moves by transferring to another functional unit with no linguistic demands, however, this move would induce a downgrade shift in their career.

Therefore, employees in the agricultural industry should be encouraged to learn and improve their English language skills as language fluency plays an important role in shaping and driving the employees’ career paths and employability.

Conclusion

From the standpoint of both the employees and employers, a more comprehensive perspective on the role of English Language competence and its impact on employability and career progression has been acquired. This is an area of further investigation which can help to bring better understanding to the effects that language can have on the employment process in Malaysia.

The findings of this study suggest that it is essential for universities to ensure that their students develop English proficiency and good communication skills. For students to improve their command of the language, it is important that English is made the medium of instruction in all universities in Malaysia. This will help to create an English-speaking environment, emulating the various workplaces in Malaysia, where English is the dominant language. It is hoped that university graduates will be better prepared for the workplace in future as without the necessary language skills they may be in a disadvantageous position.

Additionally, organisations need to be aware of the importance of providing language training to their employees as this will open developmental opportunities for career progression within the organisations. Accordingly, organisations need to ensure language considerations are included in human resource activities.

Data and software availability

Underlying data

Figshare: Role of English language in agricultural organisations, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.17194823.v3> (Bhar & Rafik-Galea, 2021a).

This project contains the following underlying data:

1. Data file: Raw data of the survey
2. Data file: Means and Percentages
3. Data file: Interview Protocol
4. Data file: Study Questionnaire

Data are available under the terms of the [Creative Commons Zero “No rights reserved” data waiver Attribution 4.0 International](#) (CC BY 4.0).

Author contributions

Sareen Kaur Bhar

Roles: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing

Shameem Rafik-Galea

Roles: Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing

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Review of the Research Article: "Role of English Language in Agricultural Organisations"

The article deals with the importance of English Language for the employees working in agricultural and agriculture-related organisations. It has employed concurrent triangulation design to analyse the data by quantitatively as well as qualitatively using questionnaires and interviews. The findings of the study reinstates the assumption of the authors on the pivotal role of English language for the employees to survive as well as to secure higher positions in the organisations. The authors suggest that the policymakers in Malaysia have to look into this need and modify the educational policy for enhancing the economic situation of Malaysia besides transforming it into a developed nation in the long run.

Overall the article discusses the aim with clarity and suggests solution for the problem addressed.

Abstract:

Abstract is concise and clear. However, the authors have missed to mention the year of the study being conducted. It would give clear idea to the readers to relate with the educational policy of Malaysia at the time of the study as it plays a huge role in addressing the problem suggested in the article.

Introduction:

Introduction deals with the explanation on the Language proficiency level of employees in the agricultural and its related sectors. In addition, it discusses the role of agriculture in Malaysian

economic growth.

The authors should use the recent quote of Ministry of Education as this quote addresses the Proficiency level of graduates and employees. Recent report of graduates' English language proficiency should be mentioned to explain the current situation in Malaysia.

Marschan et al. (1977) quote should be rephrased for clarity.

The authors have mentioned 'previous studies'. However, they have not included the studies published in the year 2021.

Methods:

As mentioned in the earlier comment, the authors should include the period of the study.

Profile of the respondent has not been given in detail but only mentioned that respondents vary at different background knowledge.

At the end of the Methods section, the authors have mentioned that the data were categorized into themes. They have not elaborated on the themes they have mentioned.

Results:

Language Use in the Workplace: Sentence construction on the interpretation of the results should be modified for clarity of expression. Besides, the interpretation should be rechecked by the authors in line with the data presented in Figure 2. Further, in Figure 2, there is repetition of the variables, "Listening/Speaking (Malay)", which should be revised.

Employees' perception on importance of English: The authors have mentioned that the employees are aware of the 'importance of the role that language has in the workplace'. Do they have to stress the role of language in general or English language in particular?

In the following paragraph, they have said, "it is imperative that they have the language competence". This implies that the employees have the language competence. But the authors want to explain that the employees understand that they need to have the language competence. So, the authors have to rephrase the statement for clarity. At the end of the paragraph, they have used 'As an employer explains'. The use of 'As' is inappropriate at the place used, as the authors neither have used a statement after the quote nor have merged with previous sentence. So, it is better to remove it.

Discussion:

The authors have discussed the significance of English language for employees in organisations in general and have not discussed in specific to the role of English language for the employees working in agricultural and its related sectors.

How do the findings explain the influence of English language for the employees?. This question has been neglected to be discussed.

It is good that the authors have used Piekkari et al.'s (2015) model of Language Barrier to support their theory, but they have not elaborated on its role in specific to the agriculture and its related

sectors.

Conclusion:

The authors have stated conclusion very precisely with clarity. However, it would be good to add two or three sentences on the summary of what the article has dealt with so far.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Partly

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Curriculum Design, Teaching and Learning Methods, and 21st Century Skills Education

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however we have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 21 April 2022

<https://doi.org/10.5256/f1000research.77241.r125978>

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Hadina Habil

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The findings from the survey questionnaire were not discussed in detail. Therefore, suggestions on how to improve the present situation were not mentioned, although it was stated in the

conclusion section that the universities must ensure that the students develop English proficiency and good communication skills. For example, under Results: English language proficiency skills, information can be added to show what the skills are that the respondents can or cannot do with their English language proficiency. The same goes with the second result: Language use in the workplace: the role of English language. More details could be presented as to the role of English in the organisation. This is the same with the third finding: Employees' perception on importance of English. The present information does not provide much information for a detailed discussion of the findings.

The article will be more impactful if more details are provided about the data, the analysis, and the findings so that the discussion would be more precise and suggestions could be given to improve the situation.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Partly

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), workplace communication

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

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