

Communication: Uses and Influence of Employment among Youths: The Role of Formal Education

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this paper is to gain an insight into the importance of communication skills in employment and to determine significant roles that support communication ability in the Malaysian context. Data for the analysis were collected and gathered through a questionnaire survey that was distributed online and manually. The results were then analysed based on the frequency and percentage of variables. The findings of the study indicated that almost all respondents agreed that communication skills are important in employment. Five key determinants were provided for the respondents to evaluate their importance in helping to develop communication skills. In view of this, formal education is perceived as the most substantial role in improving one's communication skills. It is thus recommended to respond to the key factors through integration of different approaches to enhance language proficiency and communication skills among youths.

Keywords: Communication skills, employment, formal education, language proficiency, youths

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INTRODUCTION

Communication takes place every day in our daily life. It is about sharing, as without sharing, there would be no communication. Communication involves a repetitive process whereby a speaker encodes information and sends it through a channel to the listener to decode the linguistic information. The listener then

takes the input from the speaker, processes the information and translates it back into a thought (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2010; Willems & Varley, 2010). To elaborate further, Kottak (2010) explained that we communicate when we transmit information to others and receive such information from them. In this process, our expressions, gestures and movements, even if performed unconsciously, convey information and are part of our communication style.

Effective communication skills are essential. To a certain extent, we are able to communicate without using language, but we require language for real communication (Willems & Varley, 2010). This has led to an understanding that individuals with a common code can communicate as they share the same code; thus, communicating with others inevitably involves the language system. Kottak (2010) further highlighted the role of language, spoken (speech) and written (writing has existed for about 6,000 years), as our primary means of communication. This is an intuitively interesting view, saying that communication in our everyday lives relies on language most of the time, be it in a face-to-face conversation, writing a letter or any other forms of exchange. Therefore, the teaching of language as an outcome, along with expert content, is important to prepare one to communicate better with others.

Learning occurs throughout one's life through three main education systems, namely formal education, non-formal education and informal education. In many countries, formal education is understood

as a type of intentional, organised and structured learning. Formal learning opportunities are offered in schools, training institutions and at colleges and universities. In general, it has a clear curriculum in its educational system, rules for certification and learning objectives, methodology and expected outcomes (Bois-Reymond, 2003; Dib, 1988; Eaton, 2010; Werquin, 2010). On the other hand, non-formal education refers to additional learning environments. As stated by Eaton (2010), non-formal learning may be formally or loosely organised. It may be somewhat structured, but unlike formal education, no grades are given. To elaborate, characteristics of non-formal education are found when the adopted strategy does not require student attendance, decreasing the contact between teacher and student, and most activities take place outside the institution, for instance, home reading and paperwork (Dib, 1988). Meanwhile, informal education is relatively different from formal education and, particularly, from non-formal education even though it is able to maintain a close relationship with both in certain cases. For instance, informal education does not necessarily have to include the objectives and subjects usually encompassed by the traditional curricula, and it does not correspond to an organised and systematic view of education (Dib, 1988).

As communication is said to be essential in one's life to convey information to others, emphasis on language teaching is therefore highlighted in education to enhance one's ability to communicate. Nevertheless,

language barriers occur when people do not speak the same language, or do not have the same level of language proficiency. At times, barriers can also occur when participants are using the same language. Hence, language teaching should be emphasised especially in formal education to reduce the language problems and communication barriers.

Malaysia as a multi-racial country consists of three main ethnicities, namely

the Malays, Chinese and Indians, and other indigenous ethnicities. It is a melting pot where many different languages are spoken in everyday conversations. Among all these languages, Bahasa Malaysia is the official language while English is viewed as a global language, well-recognised worldwide and is a ‘must-learn’ language. Understanding the importance of these two languages, the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025

Table 1
The structure of primary public schools and secondary public schools in Malaysia

Types of school	Typical age	Years	Medium of instruction	Types of language	Weekly time allocated to each subject (in minutes)	
					Phase 1	Phase 2
Primary Education						
• National School (SK)	7-12	6	Malay	Malay	360	300
				English	300	210
				* Mandarin/ Tamil/Arab	90	60
• National-Type School (Chinese) SJK(C)	7-12	6	Mandarin	Malay	300	240
				Mandarin	360	300
				English	150	180
• National-Type School (Tamil) SJK(T)			Tamil	Malay	300	240
				Tamil	360	300
				English	150	180
Secondary Education						
• National Secondary School (SMK) Lower Secondary (Form 1 to Form 3)	13-15	3	Malay	Malay	240	240
	16-17	2		English	200	200
				* Mandarin/ Tamil/ Indigenous	40	40
• National Secondary School (SMK) Upper Secondary (Form 4 to Form 5)	16-17	2	Malay	Malay	240	240
				English	200	200
				* Mandarin/ Tamil/ Indigenous	40	40

* Teaching of Mandarin and Tamil languages, as well as other indigenous languages, wherever practical, is based on request by parents, and must consist of at least 15 pupils in the school

(2012) promotes bilingual proficiency to ensure that every child is able to attain, at minimum, operational proficiency in the Malay language, which is the national language and the language of unity, and in English, the international language of communication. Ultimately, students should be able to communicate in both the Malay and English languages upon leaving school. Table 1 displays the structure of formal education conducted in primary and secondary schools in Malaysia.

Language teaching has been emphasised in formal education, and the curriculum is improved from time to time. The four important language skills i.e. speaking, writing, listening and reading are included in the language syllabus. In most cases, oral assessments are carried out to examine students' speaking and listening skills whereas, school examinations are a popular approach in all schools to assess students' reading and writing skills.

Education is undoubtedly the platform to enhance an individual's language proficiency and communication skills. Its benefit goes further i.e. in bringing advantage to job seekers in their quest to enter the labour market. Literature has highlighted the relationship between communication skills and the employment mechanism in the job market for young people. Morreale, Osborn and Pearson (2000) stated that poor language skills, especially in writing and speaking, can prove to be a significant hurdle for youths attempting to enter the labour market for the first time. Furthermore, oral communication and listening abilities

are among the basic job skills desired by employers. Therefore, youths need to have good language skills in order to learn and to communicate. In support of Morreale et al. (2000), Bax and Mohamood (2005) pointed out that about 50.5% of technical graduates of polytechnics remain jobless for almost nine months following graduation because they lack employability skills such as communication, writing and computer skills. Rasul, Ismail, Ismail, Rajuddin and Rauf (2010) further cited results that showed that employers placed great importance on listening as there will be moments when employees often need to exhibit empathy and listen intently to customers. Hence, communication is proven to be one of the most important skills required in the current competitive employment market.

Employability skills, particularly communication skills of young people, have continually received considerable attention in recent times, and it has been noted that unless urgent steps are taken, young people's communication skills will be deteriorating and their future will bleak. This research looks into the relationship between communication skills and sustainable employment, and the influential roles believed to be particularly important in developing communication skills.

Formal Education and Communication

Formal education might be an efficient way to promote acquisitions of future skill while on the job. Verhaest and Omeij (2009) claimed that research studying the link between formal education and skill

acquisitions on-the-job is highly relevant from the integration transition policy point of view, and cited Maton (1969), who highlighted that the level of skills needed for a job can be attained through several alternative combinations of formal education and experience on the job. Hence, formal education enhances the efficiency of the employability skills, inclusive of communication skills.

As language and communication are interconnected, it is vital that educational institutions play a fundamental role in promoting knowledge and skills to enhance employability opportunities. Straková (2015) highlighted that there are two factors, internal and external, that affect language acquisition. The internal factors refer to the mental disposition of a learner, the aptitude and the ability to handle the communication process among others. On the other hand, the external factors might include the time and the frequency available for the exposure to the target language. The aim of the early language courses at schools should maximise the benefits obtained. However, Straková (2015) noticed that there were significant weaknesses of language teaching in the classroom context. Therefore, it is believed that learning a language is a complex process that need not necessarily be connected with a classroom and a teacher.

Informal Education and Communication

Learning is a lifelong endeavour. Formal education is compulsory for the majority

of students. However, it cannot guarantee a lifelong and well-paid job as it could in the past. Werquin (2010) highlighted that non-formal and informal learning outcomes are part of the lifelong learning system and the labour market, on the other hand, is a place for the production of non-formal and informal learning situations. He further explained that employers in all countries affirm that the most important non-formal and informal learning most likely takes place at work. An example of this, based on Hungary as a case study, is that formal education and a training system do not appear to consistently produce the knowledge, skills and competency required by the labour market in that country.

Communication skills can be understood not only within the framework of formal learning contexts, but also within the non-formal and informal learning contexts (Eaton, 2010). Informal learning is not systematically organised. It does not take place in a formal setting, and it is regularly either experiential, spontaneous or even both. For example, a child can learn a language in the informal setting of the home, or an adult can pick up a language through experiential learning while on vacation. In 2007, the University of Jyväskylä conducted a survey aimed to understand the language situation in Finland. In this study, the research team referred to factors other than formal education such as parents, relationship, environment, friends and own interest as some of the other possible factors that have contributed to the development of

one's language ability (Leppänen, 2008). The findings showed that informal education is another influential key determinant in developing one's communication skills.

Education on communication should begin early and continue into adult education. Hamer (2012) denoted that evidence is now both established and growing every year to explain that mothers who are attached to their babies encourage and support their child's communication skills. It clearly described the importance of family in developing one's communication skills. In the home environment, the frequency with which the child plays with letters or numbers and the frequency with which parents said they taught their child songs or nursery rhymes or parents' effort in drawing children's attention to sounds and letters, are all taken into account, and these demonstrate that what parents do has a major impact on helping develop children's communication skills. Apart from that, the individual factor also plays a prominent role in developing communication skills. For instance, when one's confidence is low, one's ability to communicate effectively with other people is usually hampered. Simone (2009) supposed that an individual often considers the difficulties in speaking confidently as the others worry about what the other person is thinking about what they are saying, and how the others might respond to them. To support one's communication ability, the individual factor is essential to boost one's own confidence level, thus breaking the communication barrier.

Communication and Employment

Communication skills are commonly recognised as one of the most significant determinants required in the workplace. Nevertheless, there are disparities between communicating ideas in the workplace and in the academic setting. According to the Office of Disability Employment Policy (2008), the format for interaction in the workplace is different from the group discussion or written homework assigned in a classroom. Students respond to the teacher or ask questions only when they are directed in the classroom context; however, at the workplace, the bigger challenge of communicating occurs when the supervisor specifically asks or seeks an individual's opinions. Hence, employees should enhance their communication skills and learn to share their ideas or concerns appropriately.

As indicated by a 2010 survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, communication skills are ranked first among a job candidate's 'must-have' skills and qualities. This emphasises the importance of good communication skills to an employer. This shows that communication skills are essential in exchanging information and conveying ideas and opinions with people (ODEP, 2012).

Gurcharan and Garib (2008) referred to a report by 'Malaysian Today' (2005) that pointed to a survey carried out by the Malaysian Government, which revealed that poor English and poor communication skills were among the four reasons for the

unemployment of about 60,000 Malaysian graduates. This shows that there is a correlation between language proficiency and communication skills. This is further supported by Daud, Abidin, Sapuan and Rajadurai (2012), who noted that proficiency in English, the ability to present ideas, explain issues and problems, the ability to speak up in a constructive manner, the ability to resolve problems, the ability to understand the issues and problems faced by a company and the ability to come up with workable solutions to problems are all good communication and interpersonal skills sought by employers. Ismail (2011) also rejected the view that good grades guarantee employment. All these show that graduates need to have a good command of the English language and other soft skills such as communication and computer skills to secure better employment opportunities.

Young people's views on the importance of communication skills in relation to sustainable employment have also been recorded in previous research. According to the findings of the National Literacy Trust Annual Literacy Survey conducted at the end of 2012 involving nearly 35,000 young people aged between 8 and 16 years old, 86.1% of the participants agreed that good communication skills are important for securing a job. These findings confirmed the results gained during the pre-project survey, in which most of these young people thought that they needed good communication skills to get a good job. This indicates that young people do have an insight into the types

of skill they are expected to possess in the workplace (Clark & Formby, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Phase 1

In Phase 1 of the preliminary study, interviews were conducted with 15 companies. An open-ended questionnaire was used in individual interviews to collect data in April 2014. The questionnaires did not contain predefined options or categories, so respondents had the freedom to respond in their own words (Ballou, 2011). This structure was favoured as it helped to discover the full range of possible answers to understand employers' perceptions of today's youths and the employability skills required in the labour market. Each session took approximately half an hour. The data collected were used as a reference in the second stage to generate the questionnaire for the youth. They were not meant to be further analysed in the study.

Phase 2

Questionnaire. A closed-ended questionnaire was developed based on past literature reviews and the findings of the preliminary study. The preliminary study, which was conducted using an open-ended questionnaire, managed to gather the most common responses in Phase 1 from respondents and these were then used to develop this closed-ended questionnaire. An option of answer choices to focus on key factors identified was

included. This questionnaire comprised two parts: the demographic profile and youths' perceptions of communication skills in sustainable employment was then administered to youths aged 15 to 40. The first part (Part A) consisted of the respondents' biographical information such as gender, age and place of residence. The second part (Part B) was aimed at determining the respondents' opinions on communication skills in sustainable employment. In this part, respondents were asked to give their view if they agreed that communication was an important skill in sustainable employment and who were the parties that they viewed as having an important role in developing an individual's communication skills. Respondents were given five answer choices; however, they were encouraged to name the parties if they were not stated in the choices given.

Respondents. Questionnaires were distributed randomly in July 2014 to 82 respondents between the ages of 15 and 40 who were selected from rural and urban areas. They were divided evenly based on gender and place of residence.

Procedure. The survey questionnaire was first created using Google Documents as it allowed the surveys to be distributed online and the analysis of data to be done easily. However, since not all the respondents had access to the Internet, hard copies of the questionnaire were also randomly distributed to as many respondents as possible of the target group. Each respondent took

approximately 5 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Data from 82 responses were taken into account and further analysed.

Statistical Analysis. The results were first fed into a spreadsheet in Google Documents. The data collected were managed and documented according to the names, labels and descriptions for variables. Then the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 was used to analyse the data, and the results were presented based on frequency and percentage of variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Respondents

The respondents consisted of 41 females and 41 males, who were divided equally based on gender and place of residence. Forty-one of the respondents were from urban areas while the other 41 were from rural areas. The respondents were then divided according to different cohorts based on their age group. The three cohorts were those between the ages of 15 and 23 (47.6%, n=39); 24 to 31 years old (31.7%, n=26); and those above the age of 31 (20.7%, n=17). Table 2 describes the demographic profile of the participants who participated in the survey.

Communication Skills and Employment

Figure 1 presents the respondents' perception of communication skills in employment. Data revealed that 97.6% (n=80) of the respondents partially agreed that communication skills have a direct

Table 2
Description of respondents' demographic profile

Variables	Category	Total	
		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	41	50.0
	Male	41	50.0
Age	15-23	39	47.6
	24-31	26	31.7
	32-40	17	20.7
Place of Residence	Rural	41	50.0
	Urban	41	50.0

influence on their employment. It was noted that respondents and employers interviewed in the preliminary study showed similar perceptions of the importance of communication skills in employment, and the results were consistent with the findings from previous studies.

Similarly, a 2008 survey conducted by the University of Melbourne with 147 interviewees pointed out that the majority of interviewees felt that communication skills are considered to be the most important factor, not only in performing well, but also in providing opportunities for a promotion or career advancement in the workplace. They also believed that the skills are essential for a successful job interview,

and later to communicate effectively with colleagues and clients (Arkoudis, Hawthorne, Hawthorne, O'Loughlin, Leach, & Bexley, 2009).

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that only 1.2% (n=1) of the respondents disagreed that communication is an important skill for employment. This is possibly attributed to their high level of self-confidence and ability to communicate well, resulting in their denial of the importance of communication skills in the labour market. They believed that other determinants are more important than communication skills in getting and retaining a job.

Important Roles in Developing Communication Skills

The respondents were also asked to state the important parties who played key roles in developing their communication skills. Five options were listed for the respondents, and the results of the survey showed that 74.4% of the respondents agreed that formal education supported their communication ability. Figure 2 displays the perceived

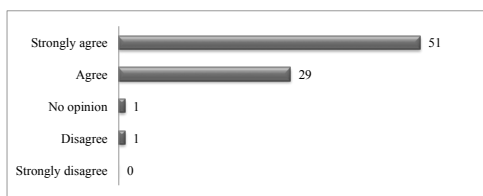


Figure 1. Respondents find communication is an important skill for employment

important roles ranked by the highest percentage value order, and as can be seen, formal education is at the top of the list in developing communication skills. In terms of informal learning, 61.0% of the respondents believed that family was the key factor influencing the development of their communication skills, followed by the environment and friends (59.8% and 48.8%, respectively). It can be concluded that the respondents considered both formal and informal education as pivotal roles in developing communication skills.

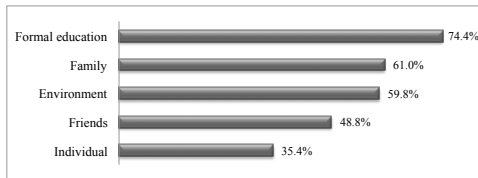


Figure 2. Respondents' perceived important roles in developing communication skills

Interestingly, only 35.4% (n=29) of respondents felt that they were solely responsible for developing their communication skills. This contradicts findings of past studies. This could possibly be due to their perception that the individual factor did not have a huge impact on developing their communication skills unlike formal and informal education.

Eighty out of 82 respondents who considered communication skills as being important for employment tended to have different opinions on the five influential roles in developing communication skills. Figure 3 reveals the opinions of the respondents

who agreed that communication skills were important in employment. Even if the respondents had no opinion or disagreed that communication skills played an important role in employment, they were of the same opinion that communication skills had to be practised and developed at home and schools.

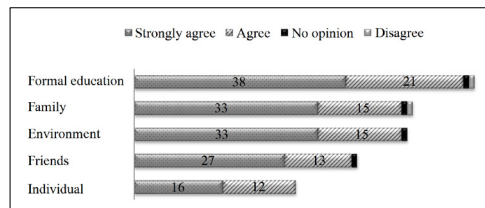


Figure 3. Respondents' views on the importance of developing communication skills based on their perception of the importance of communication skills in employment

Comparison between Rural and Urban Respondents

Figure 4 portrays the rural and urban respondents' views on the importance of the roles played by the five factors in developing communication skills. From the rural respondents' points of view, formal education and family played far more important roles than the other factors in developing communication skills. Similarly, the majority of the urban respondents considered formal education as the key factor influencing the development of communication skills. Nevertheless, more urban respondents looked into the importance of environment in providing opportunities to improve their language

proficiency. Urban respondents perceived family and peers as two other significant factors that had an impact on one's progress in developing communication skills.

More respondents from rural areas (78.0%) agreed that formal education supported the importance of developing communication ability than those from urban areas (70.7%). Many rural schools have strong ties to their community, and as students feel comfortable in their schools, and therefore, they are at their maximum potential for learning (University of Michigan, n.d.). It can be suggested that respondents from rural areas believe in formal education, and that it will lead to better learning regardless of the subject matter, including communication skills.

The findings also showed that more rural respondents (63.4%) than urban respondents (58.5%) viewed their family as another party with a substantial role in helping to develop their communication skills. This could possibly relate to most rural respondents having a closer bond with their families.

Generally, family members from rural areas would know everything about each other as family is of paramount importance to them. Urban families could be more distant from each other as a consequence of the fast pace of city life. Hence, family members spend little quality time with one another.

Rural respondents and urban respondents have totally different opinions on the importance of the environment and peers in developing communication skills. A total of 65.9% of respondents from urban areas agreed that the environment played an important role in supporting communication ability. As a result, this key factor with its high percentage ranks second on the list. More than half of the urban respondents (53.7%) had the same opinion that friends played a significant role in helping them improve their language proficiency. On the other hand, 53.7% of rural respondents believed in the impact of environment in developing communication skills, followed by friends (43.9%).

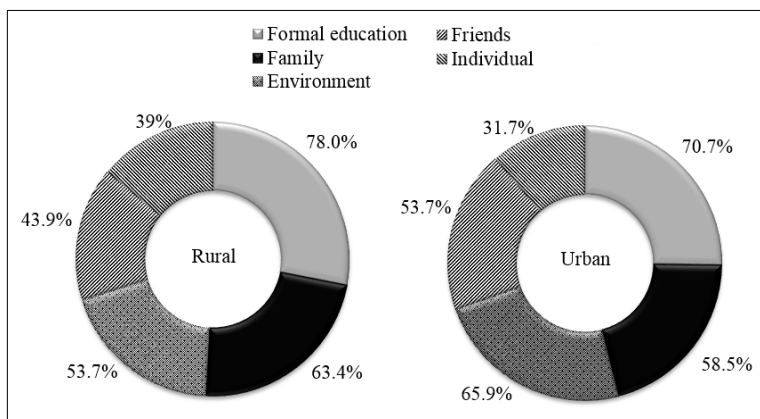


Figure 4. Rural and urban respondents' views on the importance of the roles played by the five factors in developing communication skills

Nevertheless, it is surprising that only a small percentage (31.7%) of the total urban respondents believed that individual factor had an effect on the development of communication skills. There is a significant difference in percentage when compared to other key factors. There could be a possibility that urban respondents are likely to lose their self-confidence in the process of transforming themselves into competitive speakers. Urban lifestyle is very competitive; therefore, urban respondents are exposed to competition all the time. As Nunley (2001) mentioned, competition is a popular blame agent for low self-esteem among youths. They would easily interpret a competitive loss as failure, and this damages their self-esteem. When they lose their self-esteem, they tend to lose their confidence in believing that their ultimate ability and effort can make a difference. As a result, urban respondents are inclined to believe that other parties have a more significant role in sharpening their communication skills.

CONCLUSION

Language proficiency and communication skills are important in preparing youths for the labour market. Therefore, it is important to determine the parties who play important roles in developing the communication skills of youths that will ensure employment opportunities and career prospects.

This study provides insights into the key factors that have potential roles in

and an impact on one's communication ability. The next step of action is to respond to these key factors through integrated approaches to enhance language proficiency and communication skills among youths and to prepare them for the workplace.

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