

Workplace English Communication in Rural Educational Administration: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Needs of Non-Teaching Educational Officers

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Abstract

English plays an important role in professional communication within Malaysia's educational administration, particularly in tasks involving documentation, reporting, and inter-agency correspondence. Despite its institutional importance, English use in many district education offices remains relatively limited due to the dominance of Malay and local languages in everyday workplace interactions. Existing research on workplace English in Malaysia has largely focused on teachers, students, or administrative personnel in urban or higher education settings, leaving the communicative needs of non-teaching educational officers in rural administrative environments underexplored. Addressing this gap, this paper develops a conceptual framework to understand workplace English communication needs among educational officers in rural district education offices. Drawing on literature on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), workplace communication, and needs analysis, the framework identifies four key dimensions that shape workplace English communication. These dimensions explain how workplace communication experiences shape the identification of priority English language skills required for professional development. The paper also proposes theoretical propositions to guide future empirical research on workplace English communication in educational administration. By focusing on non-teaching officers in rural contexts, this study contributes to the literature on workplace English needs and provides a foundation for developing context-sensitive English language support programmes for educational administrators.

Keywords: Educational Administration, English for Occupational Purposes, Needs Analysis, Rural Non-Teaching Educational Officers, Workplace English Communication

Introduction

English plays a significant role in professional communication within Malaysia's educational administration, particularly in tasks involving documentation, reporting, and inter-agency correspondence. In many government-related contexts, English is used

alongside Malay for formal written communication, policy dissemination, and engagement with external stakeholders (Husin & Radzuan, 2021; Husin & Khamis, 2022). As administrative processes become increasingly standardised and interconnected across agencies, the ability to use English effectively has become an important component of professional competence within educational organisations.

However, the extent and nature of English use vary considerably across different administrative contexts. In rural district education offices, daily workplace interactions are predominantly conducted in Malay or local languages, resulting in fewer opportunities for consistent English use. Despite this, educational officers are still required to engage with English in specific professional tasks, such as interpreting official circulars, preparing reports, and communicating with external agencies. This creates a unique communicative environment in which English is functionally important but not consistently practised in routine workplace interaction.

Educational officers working in district education offices commonly transition from classroom teaching roles to administrative or managerial positions. While their professional backgrounds may involve the use of English in instructional or academic contexts, administrative responsibilities introduce different communicative demands that require more specialised competencies, including formal writing, document interpretation, reporting, and organisational coordination. This shift highlights the need to understand the types of English communication tasks educational officers encounter and the language skills required to perform them effectively in administrative settings.

Despite the recognised importance of English in administrative communication, existing research has paid limited attention to how workplace English is used within educational administration, particularly in rural settings. Most studies in the Malaysian context have focused on students, teachers, or administrative personnel in higher educational institutions, where exposure to English is relatively higher (Husin & Radzuan, 2021; Husin & Khamis, 2022). Consequently, the communicative realities and language needs of non-teaching educational officers in rural districts remain insufficiently understood.

In response to these gaps, this paper develops a conceptual framework to explain workplace English communication needs among non-teaching educational officers in rural educational administration. By integrating perspectives from ESP, particularly EOP, workplace communication, and needs analysis, the study proposes four key dimensions – Frequency of English Communication Tasks, Confidence in Performing English Communication Tasks, Perceived Difficulty of Workplace English Communication Tasks and Priority English Language Skills – that interact to shape professional language needs. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on a previously unexplored professional group within a rural administrative context, as well as its integrated approach to linking task-based and psychological dimensions of workplace communication. As such, this paper contributes to the social sciences by offering a context-sensitive theoretical model that can inform future empirical research and the development of targeted language support programmes for educational administrators.

Workplace English Communication in Administrative Settings

English continues to function as an important workplace language across many professional sectors in Malaysia, including education. While Malay serves as the official language of administration, English remains widely used in documentation, formal correspondence, and communication with external organisations.

Research examining workplace English use among administrative personnel indicates that English competence is often associated with improved professional effectiveness and career development. Husin and Radzuan (2021), for example, reported that administrative staff in Malaysian public universities viewed English proficiency as beneficial for professional advancement, particularly in tasks involving written communication. Similarly, Husin and Khamis (2022) found that English is frequently used when administrative personnel interact with external stakeholders or international partners.

International research also highlights the importance of English in workplace communication across various sectors. Studies conducted in different professional contexts demonstrate that English is commonly used for documentation, meetings, presentations, and cross-organisational communication (Aswirawan & Lawi, 2022; Changpueng & Pattanapichet, 2015; Xie, 2016). These findings indicate that workplace English needs extend beyond academic settings and are closely linked to the communication demands of professional environments.

However, employees in many organisations report relatively low levels of daily English use, particularly in contexts where local languages dominate routine interaction (Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021). This pattern is especially evident in rural administrative environments where opportunities for English may be limited.

Workplace English Tasks and Communicative Competence

Administrative work requires employees to perform a variety of communication tasks that involve multiple language skills. Reading tasks represent a substantial component of administrative responsibilities, as officers frequently engage with official documents, policy guidelines, circulars, and reports written in English (Lan et al., 2011; Saleh & Murtaza, 2018).

Writing tasks are equally central to administrative communication. Officers are commonly required to draft formal correspondence, prepare reports, record meeting minutes, and respond to official enquiries. Previous research suggests that writing tasks are often perceived as challenging due to the need for clarity, grammatical accuracy, and appropriate professional tone (Said & Darus, 2011; Tajuddin, 2015).

In addition to written communication, oral interaction plays an important role in administrative environments. Officers may participate in meetings, interact with stakeholders, and communicate with agencies across organisational levels. In multilingual contexts, English frequently functions as a lingua franca, facilitating communication among individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Aswirawan & Lawi, 2022).

Psychological Factors in Workplace English Communication

Beyond task demands, psychological factors influence how employees engage with English in professional environments. Communication apprehension, perceived difficulty, and lack of confidence can affect individuals' willingness to participate in English-mediated interactions (Husin & Khamis, 2022; Husin & Radzuan, 2021).

Employees who rarely use English in routine communication may experience reduced confidence when required to perform English-related tasks. Limited exposure to English can therefore reinforce perceptions of difficulty and discourage active participation in workplace communication (Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021).

Previous studies also indicate that employees often feel more comfortable with receptive skills, such as reading and listening, than with productive skills such as writing and speaking (Aswirawan & Lawi, 2022; Tajuddin, 2015). These findings suggest that psychological factors play a significant role in shaping workplace English communication experiences.

Research Gap and Contribution

Despite increasing research on workplace English communication, several important gaps remain. First, most existing studies focus on teachers, students or academic staff, while non-teaching educational officers working in administrative roles have received relatively limited scholarly attention.

Second, many studies examining workplace English communication in Malaysia focus on urban or higher-education settings where exposure to English is relatively high (Husin & Radzuan, 2021; Husin & Khamis, 2022). Rural district education offices operate within different socio-linguistic environments where Malay and local languages dominate everyday communication.

Third, previous studies often examine isolated aspects of workplace language use without systematically linking workplace communication tasks with psychological factors such as confidence and perceived task difficulty.

Addressing these gaps, this paper proposes a conceptual framework that integrates four key dimensions of workplace English communication (Figure 1).

Conceptual Framework Development

Needs analysis is widely recognised as a central component of research in ESP. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define needs analysis as a systematic process for identifying the linguistic and communicative requirements of learners in specific target situations. In workplace contexts, these needs are closely related to the communication tasks employees perform as part of their professional responsibilities.

ESP scholars emphasise that effective language development initiatives must be grounded in an understanding of authentic workplace communication demands (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Similarly, Richards (2001) highlights the importance of analysing target language use in professional environments in order to design relevant and context-appropriate language development programmes. Within administrative settings, examining

how employees use language in their daily tasks can provide valuable insights into the types of communication skills required for effective job performance.

Building on these perspectives, this paper proposes a conceptual framework for understanding workplace English communication needs among educational officers in rural administrative contexts. The framework conceptualises workplace English communication through four interrelated dimensions. As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework suggests that the frequency with which officers engage in English communication tasks influences their confidence in performing these tasks. Greater exposure to workplace communication activities may increase familiarity with task requirements and contribute to higher levels of communication confidence. Confidence subsequently shapes how difficult officers perceive workplace communication activities to be, as individuals who feel more confident are generally less likely to perceive tasks as highly challenging. These experiences collectively inform the identification of priority English language skills required for effective administrative communication.

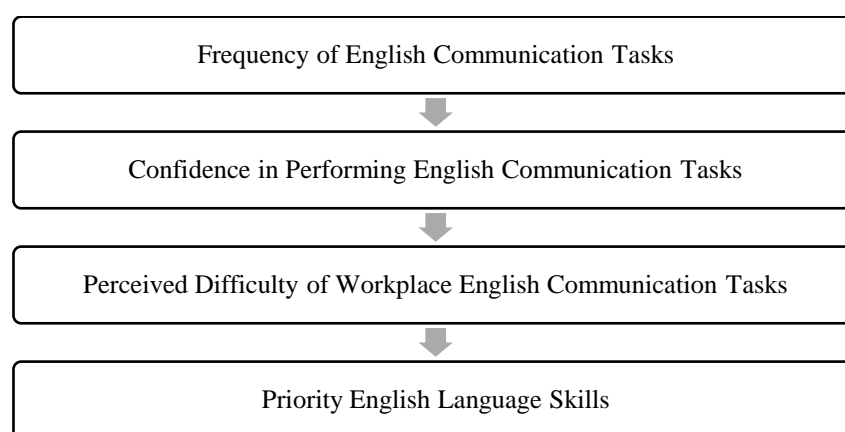


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Workplace English Communication Needs

Propositions for Future Research

Based on the proposed conceptual framework, several propositions may guide future empirical investigations of workplace English communication needs among educational officers.

Proposition 1

The frequency of workplace English communication tasks positively influences officers' confidence in performing English-mediated administrative tasks.

Proposition 2

Lower frequency of English communication tasks is associated with greater perceived difficulty in performing workplace English communication activities.

Proposition 3

Higher levels of confidence in performing English communication tasks are associated with lower perceived difficulty in workplace English communication.

Proposition 4

Greater perceived difficulty in workplace English communication tasks increases the prioritisation of specific English language skills for professional development.

Implications

The proposed framework highlights the importance of aligning language development initiatives with actual workplace communication demands. By identifying the types of communication tasks educational officers frequently encounter, organisations can better understand the language skills required for effective administrative performance.

The identification of priority English language skills may inform the development of targeted professional development initiatives aimed at strengthening workplace communication competence among educational officers. Such initiatives may focus on practical communication skills relevant to administrative contexts, including professional correspondence, document interpretation, information summarisation, and participation in workplace discussions.

Future Research Directions

Future studies may empirically examine the proposed framework across multiple district education offices to determine whether similar workplace English communication patterns emerge in other rural administrative contexts. Comparative studies involving different organisational settings may also provide broader insights into how workplace communication demands influence language needs.

In addition, mixed-method approaches combining surveys, interviews, and workplace observations may offer a deeper understanding of how educational officers experience and navigate English communication in their professional roles.

Conclusion

Workplace communication in educational administration increasingly requires the ability to operate effectively in multilingual environments where English plays an important role in documentation and inter-agency interaction. Despite this importance, the workplace English communication needs of non-teaching educational officers in rural district education offices remain underexplored.

This conceptual paper proposes a framework for understanding workplace English communication needs through four interconnected dimensions (Figure 1). By integrating these dimensions, the framework provides a theoretical basis for examining workplace English communication in educational administration and offers a theoretical foundation for future empirical research on language needs in rural administrative contexts. Future empirical studies may apply this framework to examine workplace English communication needs among educational officers across different district education offices.

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