



P-ISSN 2355-2794
E-ISSN 2461-0275

Industrial Trainees Learning Experiences of English Related Tasks at the Workplace

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Abstract

This study aims to examine (a) the needs and usage of English language by Industrial Trainees at their workplace, (b) the challenges they faced, and (c) the relevance of Diploma in English courses in a public university in Malaysia to their language and communication needs at the workplace. The sample consists of 55 final year Diploma in English students who had just completed their three months of industrial training at various organisations. The data was collected by means of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study indicated that English was widely used in the organisations and all the four language skills were required in conducting various tasks at the workplace. However, most of the trainees experienced difficulty in making online ticketing and online hotel reservations, holding briefings, attending to clients' concerns and complaints, negotiating with clients to make a deal, making oral presentations, contacting with other firms, preparing the filing system, preparing flyers/brochures/posters/advertisements and preparing accounts. It is thus suggested that the essential courses especially concerning public speaking and interpersonal communication skills to be taught before the students underwent their internship. The findings of the

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Citation in APA style: Singh, A. K. J., & Harun, R. N. S. R. (2019). Industrial trainees learning experiences of English related tasks at the workplace. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 7(1), 22-42.

Received December 15, 2019; Revised February 23, 2020; Accepted February 25, 2020

<https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v7i1.16064>

study have some pedagogical implications. Higher education institutions that offer similar courses can make use of these findings in revising the program in line with current demands of education and the workforce. Besides, the lecturers can also rethink the way how specific courses should be taught to meet the students' needs and allow them to explore meaningful learning through experiential learning.

Keywords: English at the workplace, needs analysis, industrial training, language skills, English proficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, graduate employability has become one of the central issues in media and academic debates. Many graduates remain unemployed due to their lack of language proficiency particularly in English as well as not having sufficient knowledge and competency in the jobs that they applied for (Arumugam et al., 2014; Gopala et al., 2012; Hossain et al., 2018; Othman et al., 2011; Shahrul Ridzuan & Ima Shanaz, 2013; Ting et al., 2017). In addition, despite possessing excellent results, the future graduates are still unable to communicate effectively because they lack confidence and have a poor command of the English language (Devira, 2017; Ramakrishnan & Yasin, 2012; Ting et al., 2017). Given the estimation of 53,000 unemployed graduates after six months of graduating, as in the latest Malaysia's National Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015), this is indeed a worrying trend.

With the advent of Information Technology and the continuing globalisation of markets, the graduates need to be equipped with the knowledge of English language and communication needs of their future working environment. Due to the importance of knowledge and communication skills in English at the workplace, the higher education institutions should examine job opportunities and desired expectations of related industries so that current students will be more marketable when they enter the job market. Nevertheless, the courses offered at the higher education institutions should also be relevant to the graduates in assisting them with the transition of the academic setting to the workplace environment. Universities should produce quality graduates to gain employers' trust as well as to match the balance between real demand and supply.

To strengthen the above, there is a dire need for universities to re-examine their English language curriculum regularly to ensure that the language programmes encompass the appropriate language skills needed by industry and to compete in the international arena. University language centres are in charge of delivering appropriate language proficiency courses that meet the academic and workplace needs of their graduates. It is the responsibility of the Faculty of Languages and Communication understudy to reflect, re-evaluate and refine the career needs of the students in various disciplines and at the same time establish the English language skills required by graduating students.

The present study focuses on the Diploma in English students with the aim of addressing the following research questions:

- What are the needs and usage of English language by Industrial Trainees in their workplace?
- What are the challenges that Industrial Trainees face in their workplace?
- How relevant is the Diploma in English courses in the university understudy to the Industrial Trainees' language and communication needs at the workplace?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In view of globalisation and increasing competition among nations in the world, it is imperative that students at the tertiary level have a good command of the English language in order to secure jobs of their choice and have a successful career. Graduates from the Faculty of Languages and Communication need to be equipped with the necessary language skills for the future of work. This can be ensured by carrying out a needs analysis that helps to determine the English language skills required by the Industrial Trainees in their workplace. Besides, a needs analysis can also help to establish the extent to which these language skills are being met by the existing Diploma in English programme at the university understudy and to bridge the gap between the English training provided and the English skills required at work.

According to Richards (2001, p. 51), needs analysis can be viewed “as procedures used to collect information about learners’ needs”. Similarly, Nunan (1998, p. 13) considered needs analysis as “techniques and procedures for collecting information to be used in syllabus design”. Van Els et al. (1984) and Richards and Rodgers (1988) also see it as a useful tool to understand students’ needs and to help in the process of curriculum development as well as the implementation of educational policies. These researchers have the same opinion that a needs analysis provides a basis for setting course goals, objectives and types of teaching/learning activities that are to be used in a language programme. In similar vein, the researchers also agreed that a needs analysis can be used to evaluate the outcome of a language programme as well as to ensure the right solution is implemented to meet specific needs. When the needs analysis is conducted and language obstacles are determined periodically, the language course materials remain relevant and motivating (Aldohon, 2014; Azmi et al., 2018). Considering the above definitions, needs analysis in this study stands for the language needs and usage of Industrial Trainees from the Diploma in English programme at their workplace.

Previous studies have reported that English is an indispensable language for employment and occupational purposes. English is now universally accepted as the global language or world’s lingua franca (Gopala et al., 2012; Paruppali, 2019; Shrestha et al., 2018). It is widely used in both government and private organisations as the workplace tasks and transitions are carried out in English (Carol et al., 2011; Gopala et al., 2012; Saleh & Murtaza, 2018; Sarudin et al., 2013; Woo & Teng, 2019). Sarudin et al. (2013) have investigated the importance of graduates’ English language competency for employment purposes and examined the need of the industry for an English competency certification test. They found that the employers and industry are in need of a valid, reliable, globally benchmarked and industry-driven English competency certification test for employment purposes.

However, in some cases, English has been presided as a dominant language in the corporate world particularly in terms of division across some Malaysian banks

(Said & Darus, 2011; Saleh & Murtaza, 2018; Ting et al., 2017). Malay is used as the national language when communicating. In another related study, Bidin and Musa (2011) have revealed that English is not necessary for the supporting staff in performing their duties at one of the Malaysian public universities. Instead, English only comes in handy for them when there is a need for personal use. The distinction between these aforementioned studies is the usage of English according to the ranks, purposes and tasks at the workplace. There is a need for English which serve variety of purposes such as reading English materials, writing emails or letters in English and establishing social relationships with the clients in English instead of Malay language.

Furthermore, the lack of English language proficiency among graduates is the main reason for the high rates of unemployment in Malaysia. Most of them face difficulties mainly in the area of speaking and writing skills (Carol et al., 2011; Gopala et al., 2012; Law, 2018; Omar & Rajoo, 2016). In many studies, productive skills such as speaking and writing are seen to be more important than receptive skills (Chan, 2014; Sarudin et al., 2013). This is because speaking and writing skills are directly assessed in the recruitment process and these skills are further required for various tasks at the workplace. Besides, productive skills can provide graduates with some space for their critical thinking abilities. Although priority is given to the productive skills due to its demands and needs, it is still considered that all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are equally important and essential for graduates to be proficient in English to secure employment as well as to perform efficiently at work.

Kaur et al. (2012) have studied language barriers faced by employees working in various fields related to Information Technology in Malaysia. The findings indicated that employees were satisfied with the method of communication utilised by the organisation in achieving their goals. They were given the opportunity to express and contribute ideas during the discussions. Nevertheless, the challenges they faced were language difficulties particularly grammar and the influence of their own cultural background that made communication with other races challenging (Shrestha et al., 2018).

In order to improve language skills, several suggestions have been made in previous studies. First, Carol et al. (2011), Chan (2014), Evans (2013), Ibrahim (2019) and Ahmed (2017) have suggested using authentic activities or materials in the classroom. This includes real-life cases or scenarios in the English courses which provide learners with the required workplace skills. Second, Gopala et al. (2012), David and Saeipoor (2018), Ali and Aireen (2012), and Singh (2019) have recommended a need for a new syllabus design that emphasises on the development of soft skills such as interpersonal skills, communication skills, negotiation skills and other vital skills inherent in communication. These courses can increase the future graduates' motivation and productivity as well as preparing them for a more dynamic, loyal and positive work environment. Third, Carol et al. (2011), Said and Darus (2011), Ali and Aireen (2012), Sarudin et al. (2013), and Rajprasit and Hemchua (2015) have highlighted to implement English language training programs for employees to enhance their English language proficiency. Sufficient training must be provided for graduates in meeting the demands of workplace tasks.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a survey research design to examine: (a) the needs and usage of English language by Industrial Trainees in their workplace, (b) the challenges they faced, and (c) the relevance of Diploma in English courses in a public university in Malaysia to their language and communication needs at the workplace.

3.2 Respondents of the Study

The respondents were 55 final year Diploma in English students who had completed their three months of industrial training at various organizations in Malaysia. Out of that number, 81.8% ($n=45$) were female participants while 18.2% ($n=10$) were male. In terms of their job rank during the internship, more than two-thirds of them (85.5%; $n=47$) were junior staff, 9.1% of them mid-level and 5.5% senior members of staff. The respondents did their internship in 10 different industrial sectors. The industry sectors were business, communication, construction and related engineering, retail and distribution, education and training, environment, finance and banking services, health-related and social sciences, tourism and travel-related services, recreational, cultural and sporting services and logistics and transportation (see Table 1). Table 1 provides a breakdown of the total number of respondents from each sector.

Table 1. Respondents by industry sector.

No.	Industry Sectors	N	%
1	Communication	15	27.3
2	Education and Training	11	20.0
3	Tourism and Travel Related Services	11	20.0
4	Business	8	14.5
5	Recreational, Cultural & Sporting Services	3	5.5
6	Constructions and Related Engineering	2	3.6
7	Retail and Distribution	2	3.6
8	Finance and Banking Services	1	1.8
9	Health-Related and Social Services	1	1.8
10	Logistics and Transportation	1	1.8
	Total	55	100.0

The focus is given on Diploma in English students because so far little has been done to examine the needs, usage and challenges faced by English language Industrial Trainees as well as the relevance of their courses at the university to their language and communication needs at the workplace. Furthermore, it was reported that poor command of English language is one of the significant factors influencing unemployment among graduates in Malaysia (Hossain et al., 2018; Idham et al., 2014; Omar & Rajoo, 2016). Thus, it is pertinent that a study to be conducted to examine further the aspects related to industrial training and at the same time ensuring the quality and alignment of tertiary education to the work demands, tasks and work environment of the future graduates.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were collected and analysed using quantitative methods. A questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were employed in this study. The questionnaire was adopted from questionnaires used in two previous studies (Carol et al., 2011; Chan, 2014). The questionnaire was divided into four sections. In Section A, respondents were asked to provide personal information related to their gender, race, sector where they were doing their internship, job rank, work experience and languages used at the workplace. Section B to D collected the data relating to the objectives of this study. Section B concerned the industrial trainees' language needs and usage in their workplace. Section C explored the challenges faced by the industrial trainees in terms of four primary skills, followed by an open-ended question requiring respondents to elaborate further on the difficulties faced in terms of tasks that cover all four skills in the workplace. Section D investigated the relevance of Diploma in English courses at the university to the language and communication needs at the workplace, followed by open-ended questions to allow more opinions. All questions made use of Likert scale responses which ranged from very often to not at all, except for the open-ended questions.

The questionnaire was piloted to a set of respondents and the calculated value of Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test is (0.98). The high alpha value ($\alpha=0.98$) indicates that the questionnaire exhibited excellent internal consistency. The questionnaire was administered to all respondents using Google Docs. The reason for having an online survey was to provide convenience for the respondents to answer the questionnaire at their own pace, time and preferences. The shorter and longer URL links for the questionnaire were posted in the Facebook Groups. Respondents were given two weeks to complete the questionnaire online. The data collected were then tabulated and analysed using the descriptive statistics: frequency counts, percentages, mean scores and standard deviations.

The semi-structured interviews were held with 18 respondents on a voluntary basis. The interviews were conducted individually, and each interview lasted for about 10 minutes. Five questions were asked during the interview sessions. These questions were related to the questionnaire with the aim to get more in-depth details from the respondents during their internship. A verbatim transcription was done for the purpose of content analysis. The responses were categorically coded based on the three objectives of the study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports results obtained from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, including (a) English language needs and usage at the workplace, (b) challenges faced by the industrial trainees in terms of the four skills, (c) relevance of Diploma in English courses, and (d) suggestions how Diploma in English courses could be improved in order to be more effective and relevant to the workplace language and communication.

4.1 English Language Needs and Usage at the Workplace

Based on the need analysis, most of the trainees rated all the four language skills as often used at their workplace (see Table 2). Surprisingly, listening and speaking skills were ranked as the top among the four skills in which the mean scores for both skills were similar ($M=4.47$, 89.4%), followed by reading skill ($M=4.20$, 84.0%) and finally writing skill ($M=4.18$, 83.6%). For the total score, all the four skills were ranked as ‘often’ used at the workplace ($M=4.33$, 86.6%). This indicated that the majority of trainees expressed a great need to master the listening and speaking skills since they felt its importance at their workplace. This may explain the fact that the nature of the job itself, which was related to a particular industry sector such as communication, education and training or tourism industry, required the trainees to make and receive phone calls, send and receive messages, deal with customers or clients, give information and engage into conversations at the workplace. As a result, one can assume with confidence that the trainees used English listening and speaking skills more in their daily work to communicate with other individuals at work or with clients who used English. The result of this study agrees with the findings from studies by [Aldohon \(2014\)](#), [Coskun \(2009\)](#), [Ali and Aireen \(2012\)](#), [Saleh and Murtaza \(2018\)](#), and [Rajprasit and Hemchua \(2015\)](#). The results of these studies also indicated that employees from tourism industry and human resource department coded the four English skills as highly needed, especially listening and speaking skills.

Table 2. English language skills used at the workplace.

No.	Language Skills	Mean	SD	Percentage	Level
1	Listening	4.47	.790	89.4	Often
2	Speaking	4.47	.858	89.4	Often
3	Reading	4.20	.911	84.0	Often
4	Writing	4.18	.925	83.6	Often
	Total Score	4.33		86.6	Often

Apart from this, it was learnt that a wide range of workplace tasks was carried out in English (see Figure 1). In terms of listening and speaking tasks, trainees often used English when making or receiving phone calls ($M=4.55$), interacting with clients or customers ($M=4.27$), handling telephone inquiries ($M=4.27$), giving or receiving instructions ($M=4.27$), communicating with other colleagues ($M=4.20$) and communicating with the boss or superior ($M=4.16$). On the contrary, work tasks that rarely used English were making announcements ($M=2.80$), holding briefings ($M=2.78$), attending professional training and workshops ($M=2.76$), attending to client’s or customers’ complaints ($M=2.71$) and making online ticketing and online hotel reservations ($M=2.35$).

From the results illustrated in Figure 1, it can be said that trainees used English in general conversations with clients, colleagues and superior; provided services to local and international clients; answered questions and solved problems when they were on the phone or having meetings at the meeting room. These communicative tasks and functions of English were very important to be exhibited at the workplace and required the trainees to be highly trained and have good language use. However, it depends on the nature of industry in which the communication is considered as the key feature and prioritised. Usually an international industry involves with a range of intercultural encounters at the workplace. Thus, the importance of English is not only

seen in international contexts but also as the language of industry and medium for communication during meetings; when providing high levels of services; and dealing with people from various backgrounds (Clement & Murugavel, 2018; Harding, 2011). These findings of this study are in congruent with other studies, such as of Kedrowicz and Taylor (2013), Ali and Aireen (2012), and Rajprasit and Hemchua (2015), who also pointed out the importance of language communicative tasks and functions for engineering and human resource department.



Figure 1. Listening and speaking tasks conducted in English in the workplace.

In contrast, tasks that were reported to be carried out less frequently by the trainees were making announcements, holding briefings and attending professional trainings and workshops. This was due to the fact that these tasks were only performed by higher-ranking staff in an organisation. As most of the trainees were in their 19-20 age group, with less than ten years of experience and holding a junior rank post during internship, it was more likely that they were either not involved or less involved in these tasks. They had not yet attained higher positions and responsibilities due to their qualifications and working experiences. Another possible explanation of why briefings were not frequently practiced might be due to students' lack of familiarity with such practice. As indicated by Bhattacharyya et al. (2009), Saleh and Murtaza (2018), and Thomas (2007), briefings should be inculcated in the classroom practice to familiarise students with events which will eventually allow better participation in a community.

The analysis displayed in Figure 2 details the frequency of reading and writing tasks conducted in English at the workplace. The workplace tasks which the trainees frequently carried out in English were using computer for office purposes (M=4.55), browsing the Internet (M=4.47), reading materials from the websites (M=4.25), writing reports (M=4.18) and taking notes (M=4.11). As the majority of the trainees were doing their internship in the top three sectors, namely, communication, education

and training, and tourism industry, thus accessing information through the Internet and written documents were seen as essential requirements in their daily routine at the office. Some of the trainees held posts such as program coordinators, liaison tourist officers, assistants at the law firms, customer service agents, assistants at travel agencies, proof-readers, translators, human resource department trainees, journalism trainees and front office assistants. The aforementioned finding was consistent with the need analysis of [Stapa and Jais \(2005\)](#), in which writing reports is stated as one of the highest skills required in performing the jobs in the hospitality area. The importance of report writing is acknowledged by [Bowden \(2002\)](#) and [Jalal \(2016\)](#) in which report writing can be described as a career skill. [Bowden \(2002\)](#) further stresses that not only a task forms a part of an increasing number of jobs, but it can make a huge difference to how one is perceived and how well one gets on with the career. Today, good communication skills and the ability to write effective reports are essential competencies at the workplace.

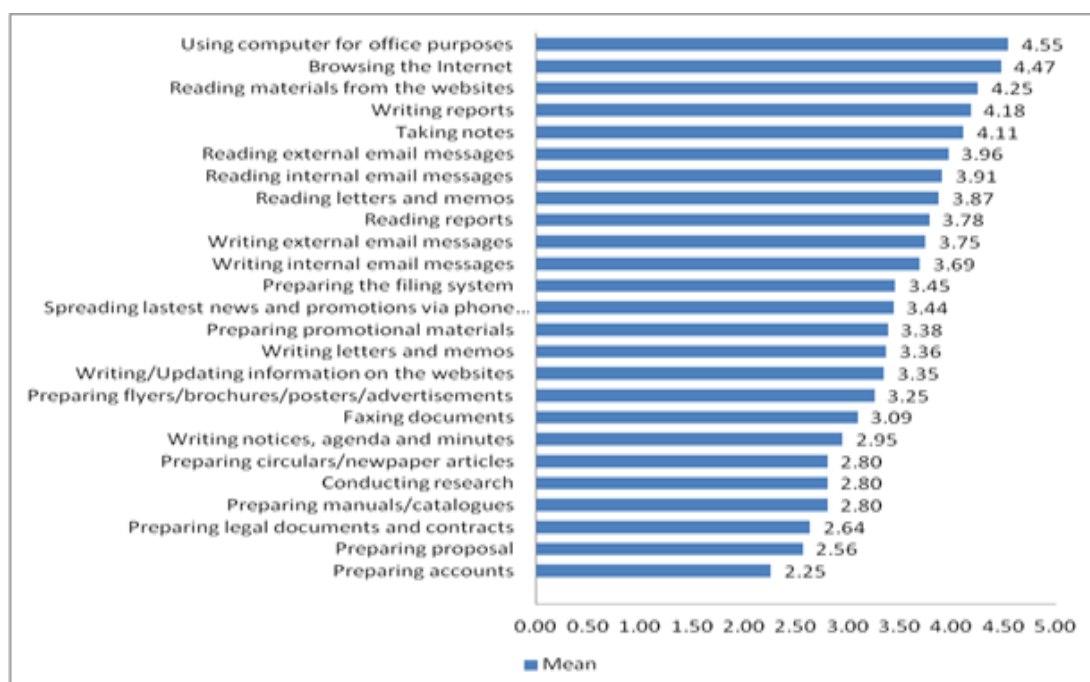


Figure 2. Reading and writing tasks conducted in English in the workplace.

On the other hand, work tasks that required minimal use of English were mainly in writing notes, agendas and minutes ($M=2.95$), preparing circulars or newspaper articles ($M=2.80$), conducting research ($M=2.80$), preparing manuals or catalogues ($M=2.80$), preparing legal documents and contracts ($M=2.64$), preparing proposals ($M=2.56$) and preparing accounts ($M=2.25$). These tasks required the trainees not only to be proficient in the language but also have adequate writing skills.

4.2 Challenges Faced by the Industrial Trainees

In terms of listening and speaking tasks, the respondents considered making online ticketing and online hotel reservations ($M= 1.53$) as the most challenging task in the workplace (see Figure 3). This was most likely because the trainees did not have the professional qualification and training in that field such as Diploma of Hotel

Management, Advanced Diploma of Hotel Management or Bachelor's Degree in Hospitality Management. Holding briefings (M=2.05), attending professional training and workshops (M=2.22), attending clients'/customers' complaints (M=2.22), making announcements (M=2.36), promoting products/services (M=2.38), making oral presentations (M=2.47), contacting with other firms (M=2.47), negotiating with clients/customers to make a deal (M=2.56), networking with clients/customers (M=2.65), dealing with public relations (M=2.73) and participating in meetings (M=2.87) were ranked as difficult tasks at the workplace. Such results are consistent with [Chan \(2014\)](#) and [Rajprasit and Hemchua \(2015\)](#) which showed that press briefings and business negotiations are statistically more challenging than other spoken items at the workplace.

However, none of the listening and speaking tasks as shown in Figure 3 was ranked at easy and easiest levels. Respondents explained in the open-ended questions why social interactions with clients or customers and making oral presentations in English were challenging to them: the reasons given were mainly related to language use, different accent or style of talking and lack of self-confidence.



Figure 3. Challenges related to listening and speaking tasks in English in the workplace.

In addition to the questionnaire, the trainees were also interviewed to elaborate on the challenges posed in relation to the listening and speaking tasks. Trainee No. 11 and No. 15 shared similar problems as mentioned above at their workplace:

- (1) "I faced difficulties in understanding several words used in Human Resource Department especially for the enrolment. Besides, I had also faced difficulties in speaking with foreign workers especially those from Nepal as they do not know how to speak English at all". (T11, Q2)

- (2) "...I had to listen everything mostly in one go. What I meant to say here is that in hotel line, which is the line I did my internship, people normally do not repeat things for the second time. With the loud environment (piano sound, nearby restaurants and guests), it was hard to obtain information immediately. No one had the sufficient time to repeat the same thing twice. In addition, some guests have their own slangs and I need to clarify certain things again. Some guests do not mind to repeat but some of them get irritated". (T15, Q2)

From the feedback given, it was found that challenges related to social interactions could be due to three reasons: noisy surroundings, unfamiliar terminology or different accent when talking on the phone. Consequently, the trainees had to "ask the customers/clients to repeat twice or more" (Respondent No. 10). To avoid the clients/customers getting irritated with the repetition of information, two respondents expressed concern about the words used in social interaction. Respondent No. 28 stated, "I had to remain very flexible with my choice words...at times I had to play with words and make it easy for some people to understand the context upon delivering my message", while Respondent No. 26 mentioned, "one has to be careful with word choice used as it mirrors the image of a company" (Respondent No. 26). A number of respondents reflected that they found difficulties in communicating with their superiors: "I find it difficult to communicate with my supervisor. I terribly became self-conscious" (Respondent No. 27); "Speaking to my manager was quite a difficult moment. He doesn't take in ideas of others" (Respondent No. 35).

Some of them also voiced out that attending clients/customers' complaints and negotiating with clients/customers were difficult for them to handle during internship. Sometimes when one is negotiating with client/customers to make a deal, he or she has to deal with people of different background, culture, knowledge, attitudes and demand: "I have to deal with customers who have different kinds of attitudes" (Respondent No. 28). Another respondent said the same thing "I think it is quite tough to deal with customers in order to convince them to buy our packages as I was new to the industry thus, I have to be alert and keep updating myself with new information everyday" (Respondent No. 7). It is undeniable that some respondents have to "face fussy customers especially those who complained a lot. Then, I have to put up with their attitude due to the customer is always right policy" (Respondent No. 30). It is indeed "hard to deal with people as we need to meet with their expectations" (Respondent No. 9). This is "because you need to persuade them no matter if your words are trustworthy or not. You need to be very patient and deal with their attitudes even though it is not your fault" (Respondent No. 10). To maintain a good deal and making decisions on the spot at times can be nerve-racking for the trainees. Thus, one of the respondents shared his view by saying that "I didn't have complete rights to make decisions on my own. I had to consult a few people including my superiors before coming to a conclusion" (Respondent No. 53).

Speaking in public or making oral presentations was another challenge faced by the trainees, since presentations require formal and professional language and the presenter always needs to "maintain the audience's attention and make sure the information is delivered well" (Respondent No. 1). The most difficult part of the presentations was the Q&A during which they would encounter unexpected questions that are difficult to tackle. Respondent No. 29 reflected his internship days "when I don't have any prior knowledge pertaining to the questions that have been asked by

clients”. Others felt that they lack of self-confidence as they are new in that field: “I don’t really have great self-confidence when speaking in front of the crowd” (Respondent No. 11), “I feel difficult to make an oral presentation in front of the hotel management board as maybe I am still new in this field” (Respondent No. 54).

As for the reading and writing tasks, the present findings suggest that the filing system (M=1.36), preparing flyers, brochures, posters and advertisements (M=1.62), and preparing accounts (M=1.78) are the most challenging tasks at workplace (see Figure 4). This finding is further supported by responses from the open-ended questions. Four respondents commented on preparing accounts, whereby they did not learn about accounting before and have no experience in that field. Here are the comments:

- (3) “Honestly, I know nothing about account. I never learn about accounting”. (Respondent No. 3)
- (4) “For me, preparing accounts was a difficult task to do as I didn’t have any experience in that field”. (Respondent No. 9)
- (5) “Preparing accounts was difficult as it involved keying in data, dealing with the financial and constantly checking the emails”. (Respondent No. 29)
- (6) “I found that preparing accounts is difficult because I’m only a practical student here. I was given a responsibility to be in charge of a program organised by my organisation and sometimes had to communicate with people. Therefore, I rarely did such work as I seldom stay in the office”. (Respondent No. 47)

Concerning the preparation of flyers, brochures, posters, advertisements and promotional materials, many of the respondents noted that it took several processes before coming up with a final piece: “Preparing materials (including brochures and flyers) was difficult because I had to go through several stages of processes. And before I could finalise the final draft, it had to go through the permission of our Director, which was challenging, considering the fact that he is a true perfectionist. It was also difficult because being an English major I was not really exposed to informal writing. In addition, the key to making promotional materials effectively is definitely making it sound perky and fun. So, I had to struggle in making things sound fun when writing a draft of a promotional material” (Respondent No. 11).

Some shared their views on how difficult it was to keep updated with the designs: “It is a little bit difficult for me as I have to keep updating the designs so that it comes to my boss’s liking. I have to work over the same thing a few times before it has been finalised” (Respondent No. 7).

Others expressed concern about the inadequate language skills, poor vocabulary, grammar mistakes and unfamiliar terminologies. Here are some of the feedbacks given in the open-ended questions:

- (7) “Sometimes I easily get confused with the grammar. Besides, I might lack of vocabulary”. (Respondent No. 2)
- (8) “Lack of practice and vocabulary”. (Respondent No. 5)

- (9) “Words that are too difficult or unknown to me”. (Respondent No. 20)
- (10) “Need to read word by word to avoid mistakes in a task given. Writing must be in formal sentences, need to avoid mistakes in terms of spelling and grammar to produce a good piece of writing”. (Respondent No. 23)
- (11) “After my supervisor reviewed my work, there will be some grammar mistakes to be corrected. Regarding that matter, I have to improve my writing skills especially grammar”. (Respondent No. 32)
- (12) “The difficult one is writing skill; I was poor in vocabularies”. (Respondent No. 35)

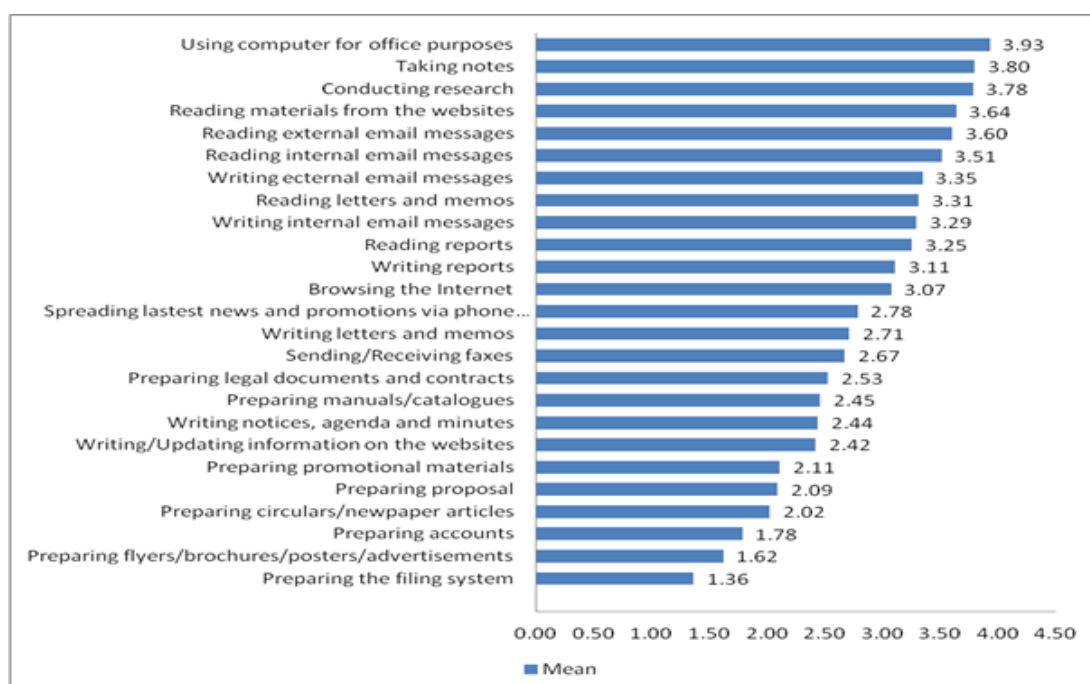


Figure 4. Challenges related to reading and writing tasks in English in the workplace.

The findings of this study are consistent with those in the studies conducted by Carol et al. (2011) and Shrestha et al. (2018) which showed that employees have difficulties in writing letters, memos, writing notices, agenda and minutes, as well as preparing legal documents and contracts.

Other challenges are related to reading and writing tasks (besides the list/items given):

- (13) “In terms of reading, I had to read every document including clients’ booking papers at a fast pace. If I fail to do so, the guests might yell at me in front of everyone. Some of the documents are printed using small fonts and it was really hard to read them”. (Trainee No, 9)

- (14) “In terms of writing, I have room for improvement in terms of proposal writing, business writing and academic writing. Due to insufficient exposure to these styles of writing, I was not able to communicate my ideas by leveraging on the styles to the fullest”. (Trainee No.13)
- (15) “My management skills were lacking a lot when I first stepped into SASTRA Education Development. I took my own initiative by learning from business leaders around me and sought for mentorship from supervisor. Taking small little steps daily escalated my work a lot”. (Trainee No. 16)

4.3 Relevance of Diploma in English Courses vs. Workplace Practice

Respondents were asked to give their views if the Diploma in English courses they had taken were relevant to their language and communication needs in the workplace. There were a number of aspects for feedback, including course learning objectives, teaching areas/topics, teaching materials, in-class activities and assignments (see Figure 5).

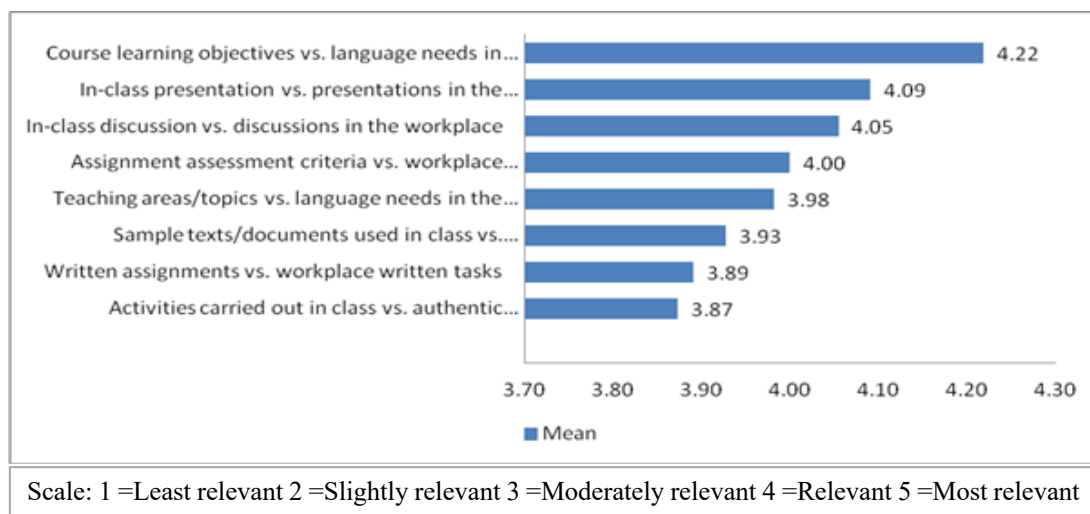


Figure 5. Diploma in English courses vs. workplace practice.

Overall, respondents thought that their current Diploma in English courses were relevant to workplace communication in different aspects. In terms of ‘Course learning objectives versus language needs in the workplace’ the mean was 4.22, followed by ‘In-class presentation vs. presentations in the workplace’ with a mean of 4.09, ‘In-class discussion vs. discussions in the workplace’ with a mean of 4.05 and ‘Assignment assessment criteria vs. workplace requirements’ with a mean of 4.00.

The aspects with the lowest mean (3.87) concerned ‘Activities carried out in class versus authentic workplace tasks’. Open-ended questions were included to examine what was exactly the gap between curriculum (Diploma in English courses) and workplace language and communication needs.

Respondents’ comments about Diploma in English courses can be divided into four main aspects: (a) overemphasis on the theoretical perspective of language (b) irrelevant courses, (c) overlapping of course content, and (d) integration of technology into particular courses. Regarding overemphasis on the theoretical perspective of

language, the respondents seemed to care very much about the content knowledge of language as for all the Diploma in English courses. They noted that the language practice or informal component was missing from the Diploma in English courses and thus there is a need to exclude some of the academic theories. They insisted for more exposure to be given on the use of English language itself not only with the course mates in the classroom but also other people in the so-called real-life work environment. That is why the authenticity of teaching materials was also highly required. Here are some of the related comments given by respondents:

- (16) “More hands-on practice...”. (Respondent No. 5)
- (17) “I opine that UPSI (Universitas Pendidikan Sultan Idris) should cultivate more practical learning rather than theoretical because it can improve communication skills that will be useful in working environment. I see many of us, though were language learners yet we couldn’t use proper English”. (Respondent No. 7)
- (18) “In my opinion, I think students need to do a lot more taking because the skill is crucial than any other skills”. (Respondent No.14)
- (19) “Needs a lot of practical lesson especially in communication areas”. (Respondent No. 16)
- (20) “Students should be given more opportunities to work outside of the classroom not only involving their friends and classmates but also other people. They need to be exposed more practically on how the working environment works”. (Respondent No. 24)
- (21) “Reduce the theory-teaching instead demonstration must be shown often in order for students to really master the courses. Students are lacking in terms of this, and to be honest not all the theories are applied during the internship”. (Respondent No. 30)
- (22) “Curriculum should include more practical work than theories. Especially for courses such as Public Speaking, Listening and Speaking, and Academic Writing. Looking through the professional lens, these courses alone are insufficient to meet the demands in the corporate sector if students do not go beyond what they have learned. More exposure should be given to the students”. (Respondent No. 35)

In the open-ended questions, the respondents expressed their desire to reduce the time spent on conceptual teaching in the classroom. It is suggested that more focus should be given on practical activities such as demonstrations, mock meetings, translating real documents and other real work tasks. The students need to engage themselves in various skills needed during their internship later to prepare them mentally and prevent the ‘culture shock’ in which some may face once they step into the working environment.

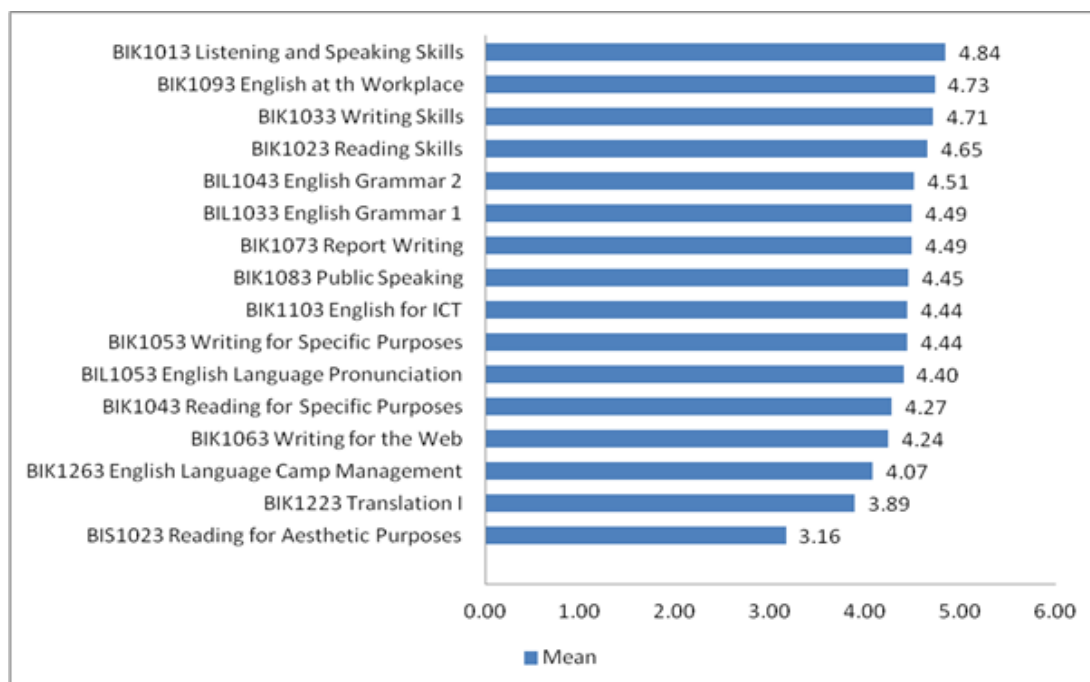
Despite having many respondents agreeing that the Diploma in English courses were already effective and relevant, yet there were two respondents who pointed out

the irrelevance of two courses. First, Respondent No. 13 stated, “the input students gain from the BIK1153 Thinking Skills course (for example, brain theory) has nothing to do when working in such company like I did”. There is a need to change the approaches and activities for a particular course to match the actual needs of the students in the future. Second, Respondent No. 15 noted that BIS1023 Reading for Aesthetic Purposes is not that useful and applicable in the future. The respondent felt that the courses offered must be 100% related to the working environment. During the interview, Trainee No. 7 shared the following related opinion:

- (23) “...courses like BIK1243 Organising Meetings and BIK1093 English at the Workplace may be integrated into one as there is a lot of overlapping between these two courses. English Grammar needs to be reinforced. The theoretical part of grammar should be emphasised and more practices (not only through exercises) should be included as well, for instance, proofreading of actual documents... exposure to different materials (local and international) should also be taken into consideration as it will broaden students mind and diversify the teaching materials”. (Trainee No. 7)

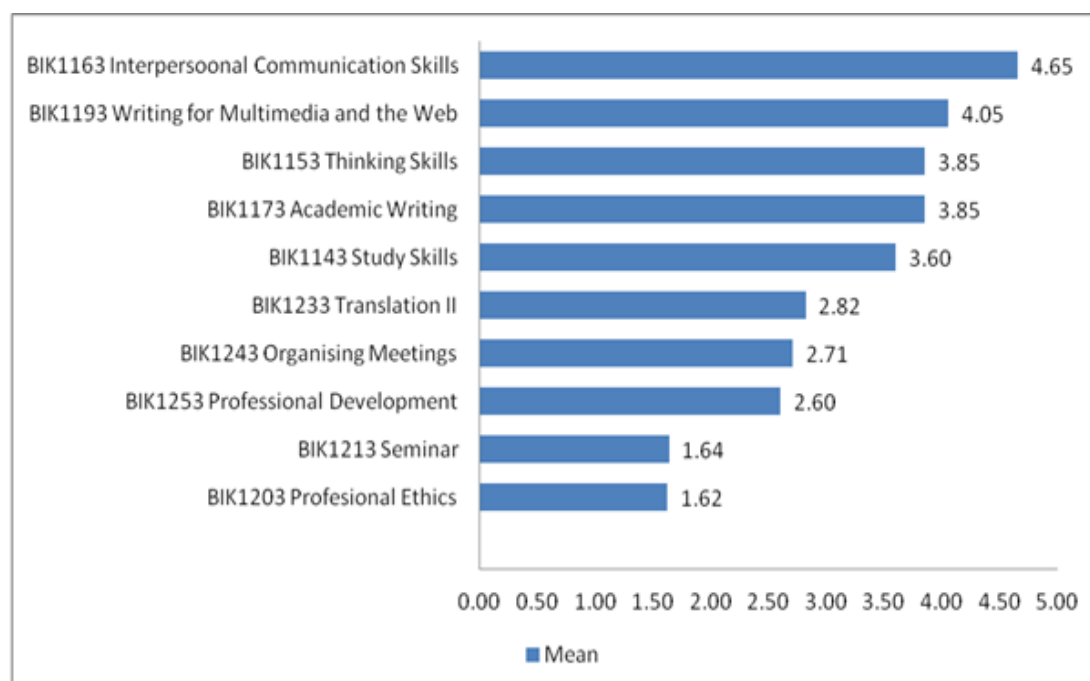
The majority of the respondents rated Diploma in English major courses as relevant ($M = > 4.00$) to the language and communication needs in the workplace (see Figure 6). From 16 major courses, 14 courses were considered relevant and two courses were rated as moderately relevant. The top five major courses were BIK1013 Listening and Speaking Skills ($M = 4.84$), BIK1093 English at the Workplace ($M = 4.73$), BIK1033 Writing Skills ($M = 4.71$), BIK1023 Reading Skills ($M = 4.65$) and BIL1043 English Grammar 2 ($M = 4.51$). The two moderately relevant courses were BIK 1223 Translation 1 ($M = 3.89$) and BIS1023 Reading for Aesthetic Purposes ($M = 3.16$).

As shown in Figure 7, two elective courses offered at the institution under study were rated as relevant: BIK1163 Interpersonal Communication Skills ($M = 4.65$) and BIK1193 Writing for Multimedia and the Web ($M = 4.05$). These courses were considered essential, as they were used every day to communicate and interact with others in the workplace. Interpersonal communication comes in handy when the trainees wanted to exchange ideas or views with their colleagues or clients at work. Three courses were rated as moderately relevant: BIK1153 Thinking Skills ($M = 3.85$), BIK1173 Academic Writing ($M = 3.85$) and BIK 1143 Study Skills ($M = 3.60$). BIK 1233 Translation II ($M = 2.82$), BIK1243 Organising Meetings ($M = 2.71$) and BIK1253 Professional Development were rated as slightly relevant whereas BIK1213 Seminar ($M = 1.64$) and BIK1203 Professional Ethics ($M = 1.62$) were rated as least relevant. The findings revealed a clear picture that trainees were not dealing with high-rank tasks such as conducting seminars or meeting the professionals. Knowing that this was their first time being exposed to the real-life work environment, trainees need more working experiences before taking the responsibilities of handling more challenging tasks.



Scale: 1 =Least relevant 2 =Slightly relevant 3 =Moderately relevant 4 =Relevant 5 =Most relevant

Figure 6. Relevance of Diploma in English major courses offered.



Scale: 1 =Least relevant 2 =Slightly relevant 3 =Moderately relevant 4 =Relevant 5 =Most relevant

Figure 7. Relevance of Diploma in English elective courses offered.

4.4 Suggestions to Improve the Diploma in English Courses

The respondents recommended several suggestions for how the Diploma in English courses could be improved in the future. First, courses such as proofreading and public relations must be implemented. This is because many students are required to handle such situations whereby, they need to proofread documents carefully at the workplace and they are also expected to know how to build a positive image between companies and people. Second, Diploma in English courses should focus on integrating computer skills such as using different software in designing pamphlets or banners as well as other computer applications. Third, it is suggested that there should be a preparation course or seminar for students who are undergoing internship or industrial training. At least, the students will be aware of what possibly to expect from them as interns and how to go about solving common issues at the workplace. Fourth, essential courses, especially Public Speaking and Interpersonal Communication Skills, should be taught before the students undergo their internship. Fifth, the lecturers or instructors involved in teaching the Diploma in English courses should rethink about the teaching style and redesign students' learning in order to meet their needs and at the same time remain relevant in the era of rapid changes. Sixth, the lecturers or instructors are encouraged to use authentic materials in the class so that the students can experience real situations in the classroom. Seventh, it is recommended to invite experts from industries to give career talk to the students. This will allow the students to ask questions related to the positions and job requirements and further help to prepare themselves for the internship and workforce. Last but not least, local students should be encouraged to mix with international students. By exposing local students with international students from different cultures and backgrounds, this helps them practice to communicate with native and non-native speakers from different countries.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study examined (a) the needs and usage of English language by Industrial Trainees at their workplace, (b) the challenges they faced, and (c) the relevance of Diploma in English courses at a public university to their language and communication needs at the workplace. The results of this study can help educators to understand the language and communication needs and practices expected out of trainees at the prospective workplace. The results from this study have also indicated the frequency and challenges of listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks at the workplace and possible suggestions were provided for educators to realign the Diploma in English programme to meet the workplace needs of various organisations and companies. It is recommended that the practical use of the English language has to be integrated extensively for all Diploma in English courses. The trainees also need to be involved in "real life" and "authentic" learning activities in the classroom as students required new skills in order to function in workplace organisations. Higher education institutions and educators should work hand-in-hand in improving the trainees' language and communication needs to prepare them to contribute to the 21st century workforce.

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