LANGUAGE BARRIERS: FEEDBACK FROM THE IT INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Meaningful interaction process between human beings necessitates effective communication especially in organisations that have rapid information exchange demands. It is perceived that most IT organisations that face communication and language barriers have lost businesses due to higher product defect rates, lack of focus on business objectives, stifled innovation and dissatisfied customers and poor customer services. This study looks at the language barriers faced by employees working in various fields related to Information Technology in Malaysia. A questionnaire was distributed to IT employees working in various international and national companies in Malaysia, and sixty two IT employees' responses were accepted. The employees had to rate the effects of each language barrier on them in the context of the workplace. Based on these findings, barriers faced by IT employees in this field can now be better understood and steps can be taken by both the industry and education sectors to overcome these barriers. It will also aid these employees to be better communicators in facing the challenges in their industry and increase their competitiveness on a global scale. We conclude that future research should more explicitly consider the different configurations of language skills that are needed by IT staff.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is crucial in a country like Malaysia which aspires to attain the status of developed nation by 2020, to have people who are able to communicate effectively in order to compete on the global platform (Gill, 2002). Thus, there is very little doubt that English plays a central role in achieving this status.

How Malaysian companies deal with language problems at the workplace and what are the exact problems remains largely absent from the literature. However, a considerable amount of work has been done in Malaysia with regards to language choice and language use in the workplace. Nair-Venugopal, 2001, 2002; Nair–Venugopal, 2003 examined multilingual employees' language use in the private workplace domain. Her analysis of the discourse of two business training organisations' training sessions revealed that language choice of the speakers depended largely on their status and position held in the organisations, educational background and language competence. The study found that English was used when the audience was from the upper rung of the ladder in the organisation. On the other hand, Malaysian English and Bahasa Malaysia were used as a strategy to accommodate those whose English language proficiency is much lower. (Nair–Venugopal, 2003) says that the switch to these sub-varieties is undertaken for both identity marking and solidarity. This is supported by previous studies which looked at the use of English in the Malaysian workplace domain (Kassim & Ali, 2010; Sundaram & Webster, 2000)

Maros (2000) studied language use in the commercial sector based on the communicative functions and needs of the firms. The findings indicated that language use was determined by the clients and the type of the organisations. Maros believes that the customer distribution which was largely local, could have affected the patterns of language use in the organisations studied. However, the study also showed that there was bilingual use of BM and English as well as Chinese and English among the higher echelons in the companies.

As can be seen here there is hardly any published work done in the Malaysian context looking at language problems faced at the workplace. To a large extent the language problems in the workplace have been relatively ignored. Therefore, it would seem appropriate to study in greater depth the language barriers faced by the IT industry.

Figure 1 which is conceived by (Harzing & Feely, 2008) in regards to communication between parent company and its subsidiary puts all the language barrier components into a model based on the design of a vicious cycle. According to them, "the combined impact of the anxiety, the polarization, the suspicion, and the negative stereotypes increases the sense of separation between the parent company and its subsidiary." Our argument is the same situation applies between any two individuals and thus it would cause the communication to become "more strained, guarded, and formal as time goes on."

2. RESEARCH METHOD

To collect the required data, a questionnaire was employed in this study. The results was a paper-based questionnaire with two sections: Section A elicits demographic information mainly on the respondents' occupation, work experience and company background while Section B focuses on language barriers faced at their workplace. For the latter, fifteen questions were used using a Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". After piloting the instrument, 100 questionnaires were distributed and 62 were returned. The data was tabulated and analysed using SPSS version 17.
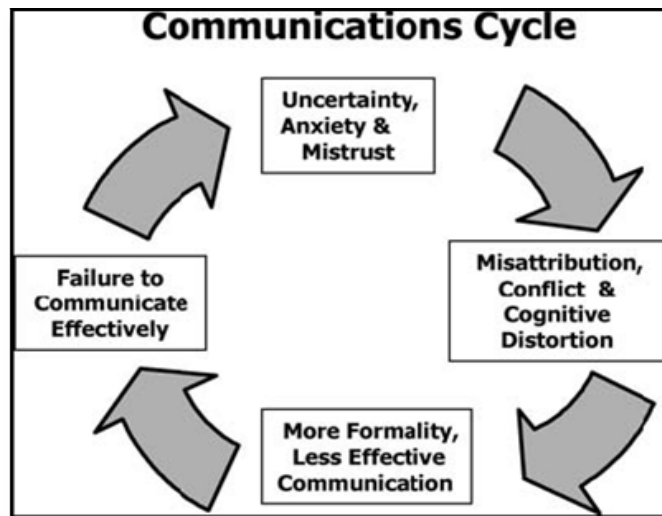

Figure 1: The Communications Cycle (Harzing & Feely, 2008)

3. SAMPLE

The survey respondents were IT executives from various companies in Malaysia. The focus is on IT personnel because thus far, little has been done to examine employees' language needs and barriers in this industry. Furthermore, it was reported in 2006 that out of 20, 217 unemployed graduates who registered with the Ministry of Human Resources Malaysia, IT graduates had the highest rate of unemployment at 19.5% (Shah, 2009). Thus, it is pertinent that a study be conducted to examine further the contributing factors including language barriers.

Based on their job functions, a majority of the respondents were involved in software design or in system and hardware development while the rest dealt with network and communication, IT support services or consultancy.

In terms of working experience, a sizeable portion of the respondents (47%) have less than 5 years of working experience compared to 16% who had spent more than a decade working. Most of them were employed by private multinational companies or private national companies. With Malaysia being a multiracial country, majority of the respondents cited Bahasa Melayu as their mother tongue, followed by Mandarin while the remaining selected mostly English or Tamil as their mother tongue.

4.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on Figure 2, about 64.5% of the respondents partially agreed that socio-cultural barriers do affect their ability to communicate with superiors in their organisation. This has affected the respondents' ability to communicate in face-to-face dealings and they feel intimidated or faced difficulties to express their opinions and ideas. However, 35.5 % of the respondents disagreed with such notion. This is possibly attributed to their ability to use various, alternative mode of communication such as emails, short messaging system, chat box, facebook, weblogs and wikis which enable them to have much freedom in exchanging ideas and viewpoints.

The survey also showed that 77.7% of the respondents agreed that socio-cultural backgrounds have a direct influence over their communication skills as shown in Figure 3. However, 22.3% of the respondents believed strong internal organisational cultural and training influences their communication skills.
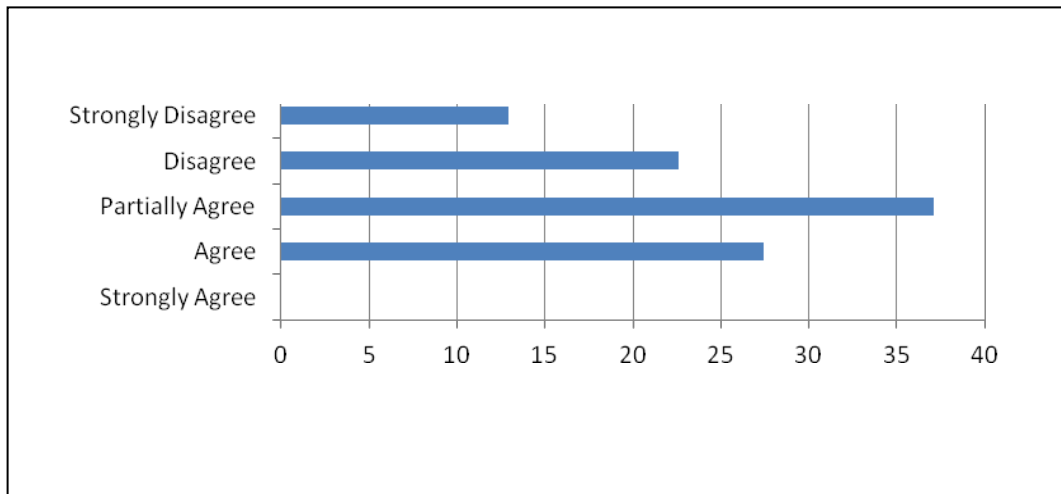

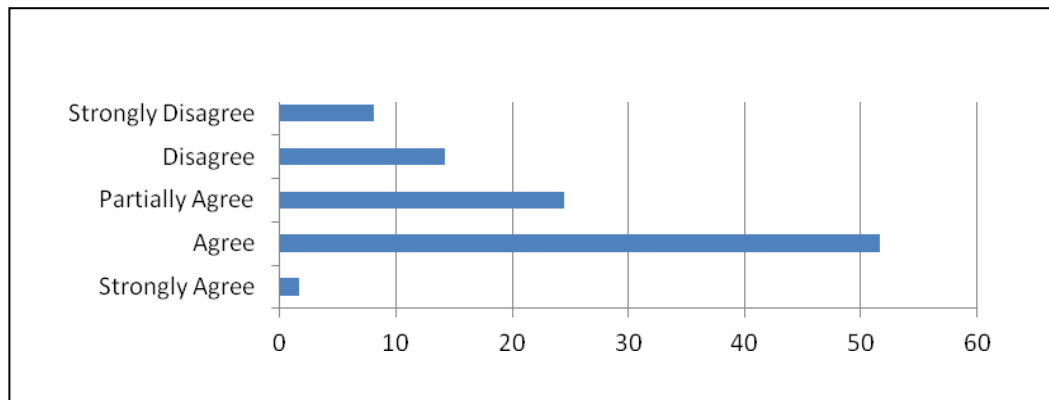**Figure 2: Feeling intimidated when communicating with people above respondent's social level**

Figure 3: Respondent's communication skills are influenced by his/her cultural background

However, this did not hinder them from communicating freely with other people from a different culture or race. This is supported by 51.7 % of the respondents who prefer to communicate to people of other races without any difficulty. Most of them may have strong understanding of their organisation's mission, vision and common norm in communication which in turn, has put them at ease to communicate freely without cultural or racial prejudice.

Similarly, 47.4 % of respondents felt that they are able to communicate well with their peers with the same socio-cultural background especially colleagues from their own race as shown in Figure 4. They might feel that having similar cultural understanding and dialect enhance understanding and promote easier knowledge sharing.
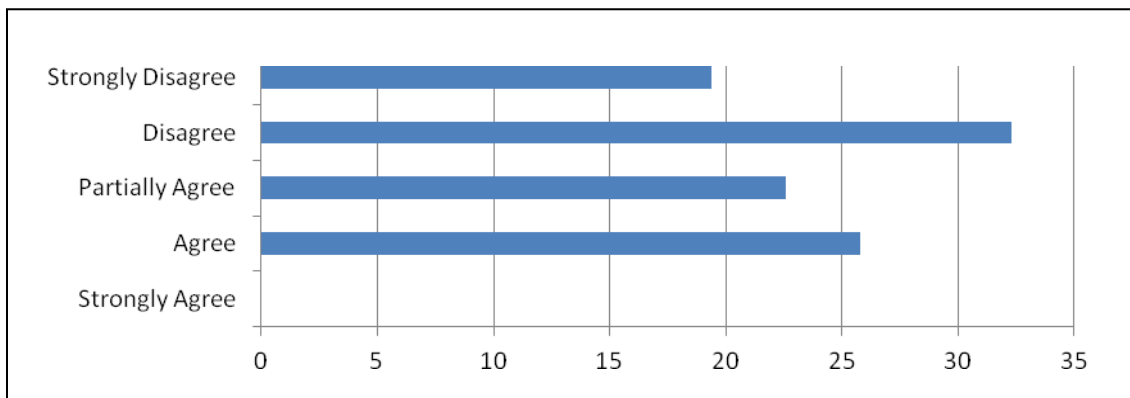

Figure 4: Respondent's preference to mix with people of his/her own race

Nevertheless, cultural background does have an impact on a person's communication skills in terms of clarity of pronunciation and accent. The survey shows that 30.6 % of the

respondents found the use of different, unfamiliar accents or mispronunciation of words does not create communication difficulties. However, 69.4 % believe that the pronunciation or the use of different accent is a major hindrance in relating their ideas and knowledge among their multiracial colleagues at the workplace as shown in Figure 5.
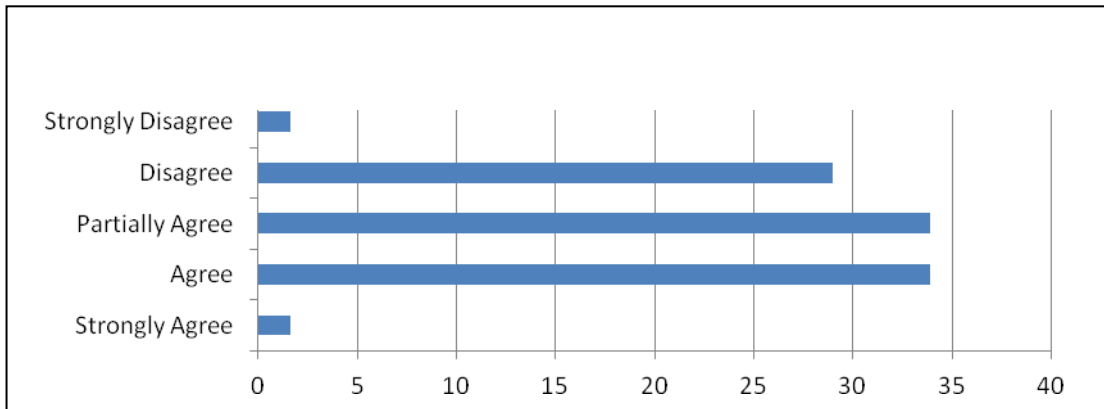

Figure 5: Difficulty faced in communication due to different accents or pronunciation of words

Similarly, 53.2% of the respondents faced difficulties in using proper grammar in formal communications such as in writing formal documents or during presentations. The correct usage of grammar when communicating is crucial in business dealings to maintain the delivery quality of IT services.

However, 46.8 % of the respondents believed that correct usage of grammar is not a major hindrance as most of the narratives in an application or online system are predefined and easy to understand as shown in Figure 6. It does not need creative text input from end-users.
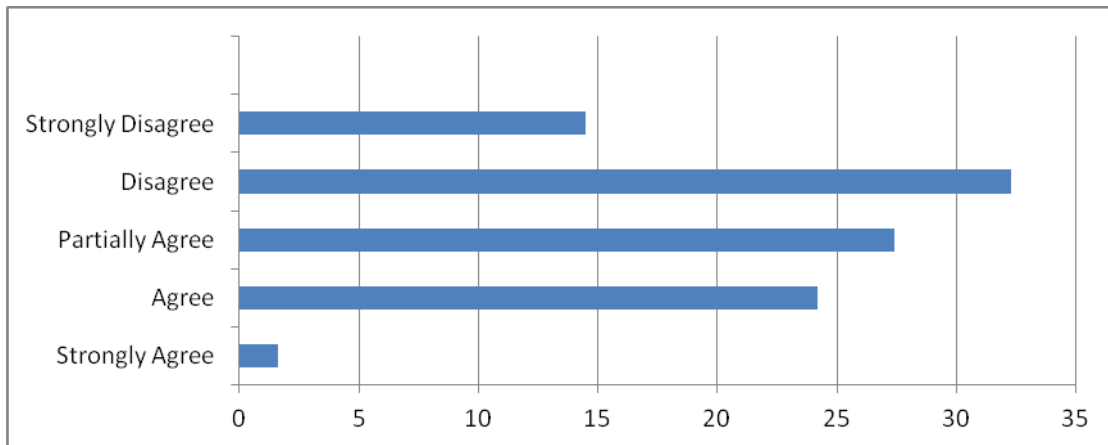

Figure 6: Respondent finds grammar difficult to handle in formal communication

There are various written and spoken methods that an organisation can employ to communicate internally or externally. According to the 62 respondents, the majority of them (45.2%) agreed and 11.3% strongly agreed that their organisations have chosen the best method of communicating in order to achieve their organisational goals. However, 35.5 % partially agreed while a small minority of them, a total of 8% strongly disagreed or disagreed with the method of communication utilised by their organisations as shown in Figure 7.
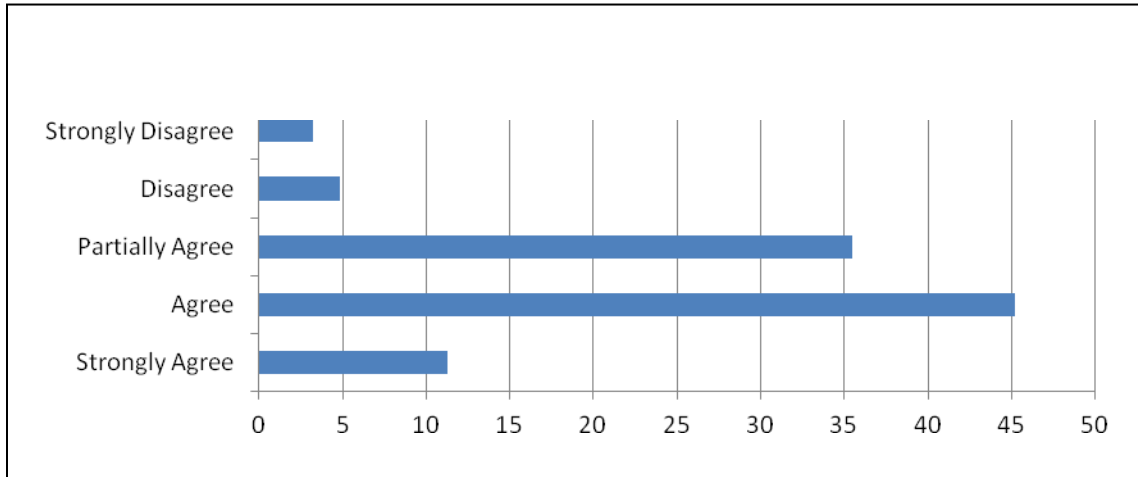

Figure 7: Respondent's organisation uses the best method in communicating in order to achieve goals

As for the opportunities to be involved in discussions, the majority of the respondents felt that they were given adequate chances to contribute. 71% of them disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they had no opportunities while 17.7% partially agreed. In addition, only 11.3% felt that they lack the chance of voicing out their opinions during discussions as shown in Figure 8.
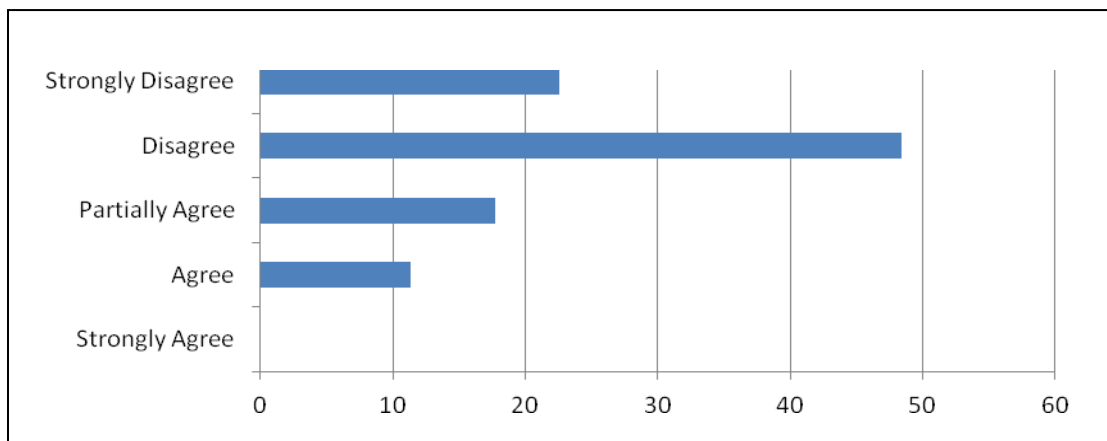

Figure 8: Respondent's lack of opportunities to contribute to discussions

Since writing reports and communicating via emails are unavoidable in an IT personnel's work, it will be interesting to ascertain if they enjoy engaging in formal written communication. From the survey, majority of the 62 respondents (35.5%) partially agreed with the statement that they disliked formal written communication. In fact, 29% of them either agreed or strongly agree that they disliked engaging in formal written communication. A total of 35.5%, on the other hand, disagreed with the statement as shown in Figure 9.
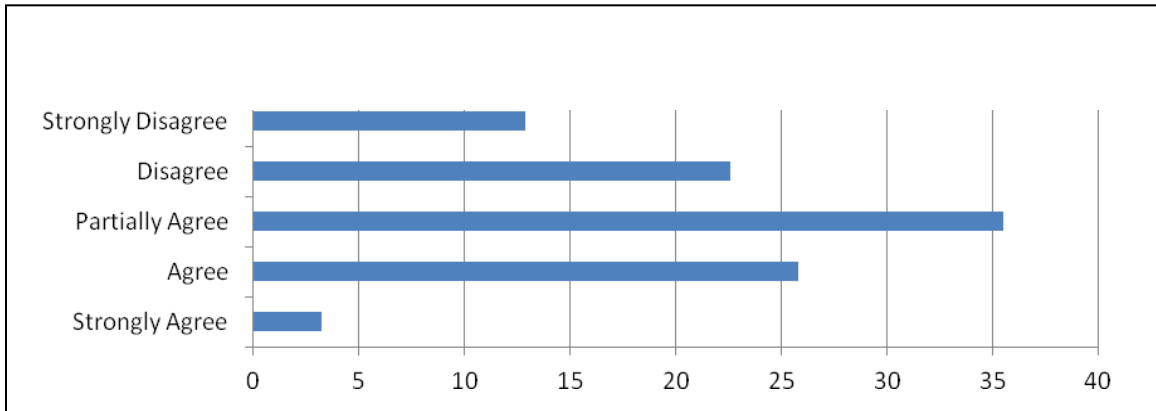

Figure 9: Respondent's dislike for formal written communication

Despite the majority's dislike towards formal written communication, 50% of the total respondents do not find it difficult to write formal letters. 27.4% partially agree that they felt that writing formal letters was difficult. Only 22.6% of them agreed that they found it challenging to write formal letters as shown in Figure 10. Interestingly, none of the respondents strongly felt that writing formal letters was difficult.
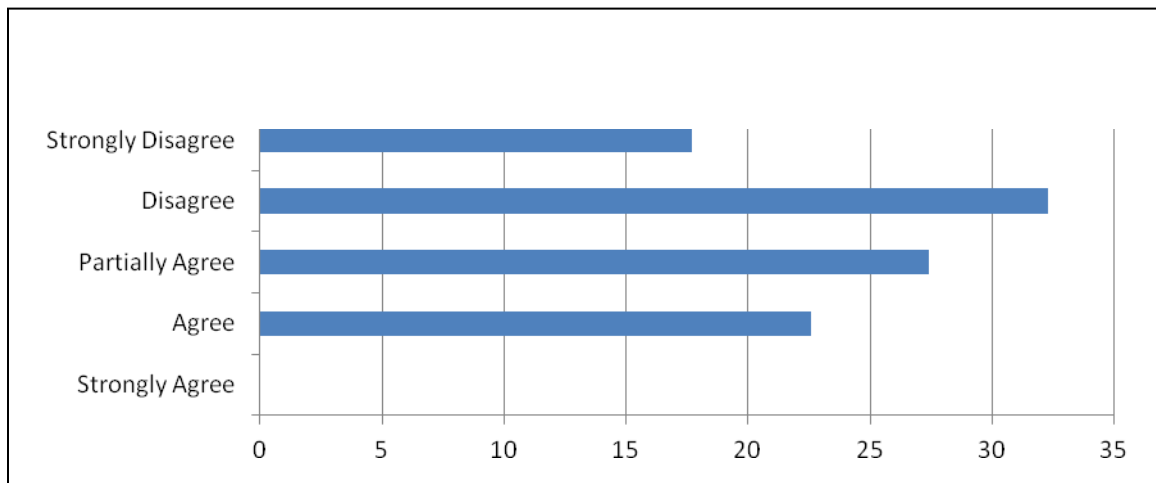

Figure 10: Difficulty in writing formal letters

40.3% of the respondents partially agreed that they found it difficult to choose the right level of formality when communicating internally or externally. On the other hand, 41.9% felt that they had no problems pitching at the proper level of formality when communicating. Only 17.7% felt that they were uncertain with the level of formality to adhere to when they had to communicate with others as shown in Figure 11.
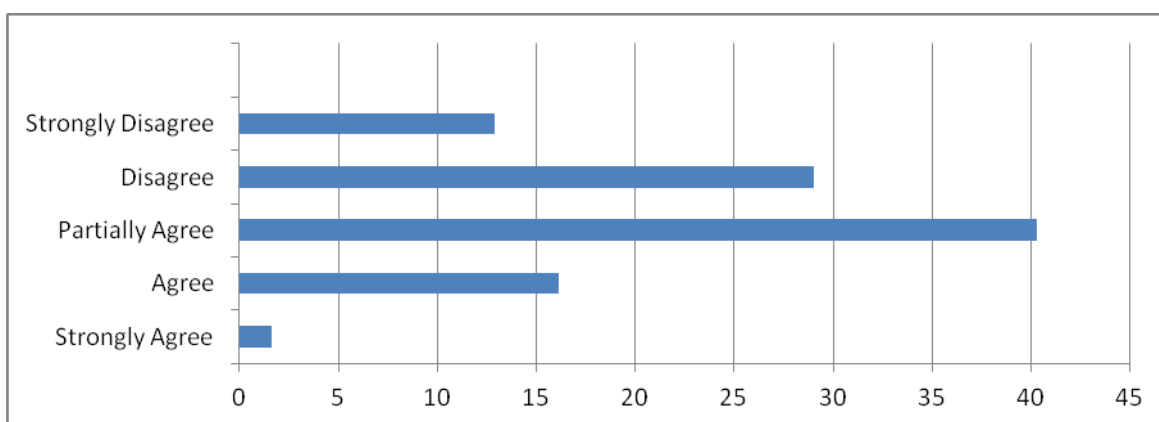

Figure 11: Difficulty in choosing the right level of formality when communicating

A total of 53% reported that they face difficulties in selecting the right words when communicating. Of the total, 24% agreed while the remaining somewhat agreed with the notion. This indicates that lack of vocabulary or knowledge of register is a challenge for the respondents. Being able to select the right words or terms to deliver their ideas to fellow employees or their superiors becomes increasingly difficult as it requires varying degrees of formality particularly in written communication which affects word choice.

Similarly, in terms of expressing oneself and stating one's purpose when communicating, 52 % of the respondents stated that they find such task difficult. It can be seen that their inability to select appropriate vocabulary ties in with their general inability to convey their ideas in a comprehensible manner. Respondents may struggle with the grammatical aspects or sentence structures when expressing themselves thereby contributing to their communication apprehension.

Nevertheless, it is a surprising finding when 58% of the respondents disagreed facing difficulties in making them as shown in Figure12. It was earlier reported that vocabulary choice and self-expression are a challenge but the same viewpoint was not shared in making themselves understood. This is possibly due to the fact that despite the lack of proficiency, they might rely on non-verbal communicative methods in putting across their ideas. These include the use of gestures, facial expressions, bodily postures or even variations in the pitch or tone of voice. As supported by (Krishna, Panchanathan, & Patel, 2010) when individuals speak or write, the messages transmitted or received are never in a vacuum. They are always accompanied by non-verbal which helps to convey a great deal of meaning whether it is intended or not.
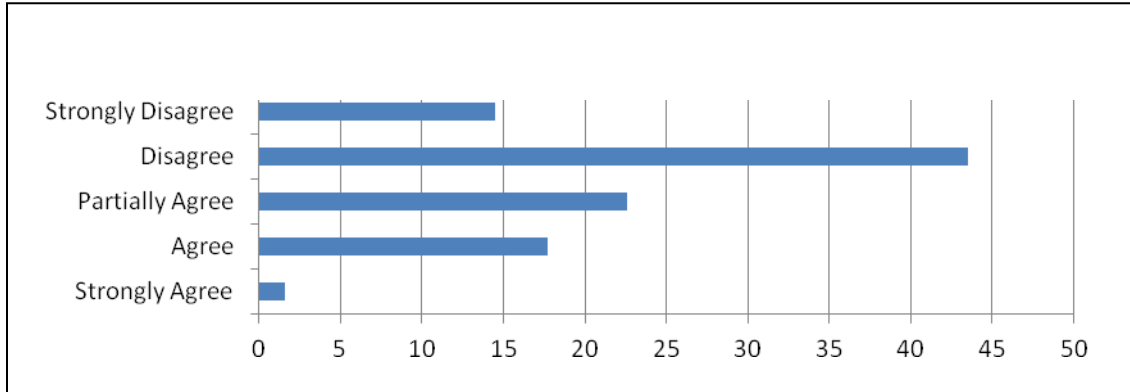
Figure 12: Difficulty in making others understand the respondent

Organisational needs of both English and Bahasa Melayu or Malay to achieve business goals and objectives place a strong demand on IT employees in Malaysia. As depicted in Figure 13, 65% of the respondents stated that their organisation value employees who can communicate in both languages. An additional 24% agreed with this notion to a certain extent. With English being the preferred language in software, hardware and IT services, the position of Bahasa Melayu as the national language should not be ignored. Any business transactions with the government sector require Bahasa Malaysia to be used as the official language of communication. As argued by (Radzuan & Kaur, 2010) "In the context of ... companies operating in Malaysia, hiring employees who are proficient in both English and Malay will benefit both the companies and new employees". Since Malaysians are either bilingual or multilingual, they also tend to code-switch particularly when communicating with those of a different ethnic group (Kassim & Ali, 2010) For these reasons, it is essential for employees in Malaysia to master both languages for formal as well as informal communication at the workplace.
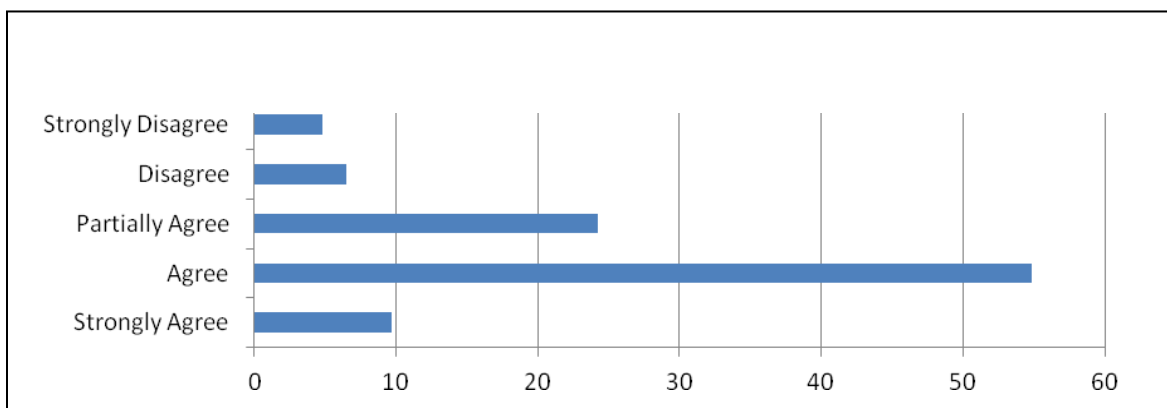

Figure 13: The importance of speaking ability in English and Bahasa Malaysia in respondent's organisation

A majority of 86% of the respondents agreed that English is more frequently used compared to Malay. This finding is expected since more than half of the respondents work in multinational companies and in organisations with subsidiaries abroad. Such scenario necessitates the use of English in their communication with foreign clients or colleagues. This is further supported by (Rafik-Galea & Hassan, 2003) and (Phang, 2006) who claim that despite its status as a second language, English is the lingua franca in the Malaysian private sector and multinational companies. It enables communication among those involved from various countries and diverse cultural backgrounds. Thus, these employees need to use English at the workplace on a daily basis. Malay, on the other hand, predominates mainly in government agencies.

5.   CONCLUSION

Freely and Harzing (2002) identify language as an "orphan of international research problem" and this impact can be seen in many organisations as business has become more diversified and international in nature. Consequently, organisations perceive language as unimportant without consciously realising those language problems can occur in any of the business activities within an organisation.

This study highlights the feedback from the IT industry identifying the language barriers faced by IT employees. Overall, the employees agree that the organisation utilises the best method in communicating in order to achieve their goals. They are also given the opportunity to express and contribute their ideas and opinions in discussions.

However, the areas that pose as challenges for them are language difficulties particularly grammar and the influence of their own cultural background that makes communication with other races challenging. The relationship between the colleagues is also a communication barrier as many feel intimidated when speaking to someone above their rank. Moreover, the respondents felt unsure of the right level of formality when communicating which can lead to confusion. Our findings are by no means conclusive and further studies must be done in this area.

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