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Spoken and Written Communication Needs of Aviation Management Trainees

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Abstract

The need to investigate the communication skills of specific participants usually arises upon demand from the stakeholders, including the employers, passengers, clients and others. The common reasons for stakeholders to consult course developers or language practitioners regarding developing a specific purpose course include poor language proficiency and lack of professional communication skills amongst personnel whose jobs require efficient communication. The needs analysis (NA) method is often used to explore the necessary communication skills at the workplace, including business, medical and aviation. In aviation, the aviation English program content is based on the stakeholders' communication requirements. Having said that, there are two main objectives of this study. Firstly, this study aims to investigate the importance of English as a medium for communication amongst AVM personnel serving in local and foreign-based companies within Malaysia. Secondly, it aims to determine the spoken and written communication activities that aviation management personnel are frequently involved in the aviation industry. Based on the findings, the NA revealed that the English language is vital in developing professional communication skills among AVM trainees as they require English proficiency for speaking and writing activities.

Introduction

The Aviation industry is considered as one of the dynamic business fields in the fast-moving global network today. One of the most significant indicators of this enterprising field is the growing number of airlines companies in line with a growing number of passengers using air transport services to travel and transport goods worldwide through thousands of flights each day. Recent evidence suggested a steady annual increase of 4-5% in demand for air transport since several years ago is expected to continue in the coming years (Miyoshi et al., 2018). In Malaysia, the aviation industry is also expanding rapidly, inviting fierce competition among various stakeholders. Today, Malaysia is known as an upcoming aerospace hub in Southeast Asia. Parallel with the famous AirAsia tagline "Now Everyone can fly", the efficient management of the aviation industry in Malaysia has resulted in tremendous growth to support the demand for air transportation service of local and neighbouring countries.

Due to such advancement, the aviation industry offers great employment opportunities to develop talents capable of managing aviation industry operations. One of the most important stakeholders in the aviation industry is the AVM personnel responsible for coordinating and managing tasks and activities in their respective departments. Hence, employers often seek ideal candidates with pertinent knowledge and skills in managing aviation departments prior to being selected as AVM personnel (Marion et al., 2014). The required knowledge and skills include professional English communication skills to manage the organization in the local or global context.

The importance of the English language in the aviation industry has been recognised since after the Second World War, as it is used as the official language for all types of communications in the international air transportation industry worldwide. Although several other languages (Mandarin, Arabic and Russian) were used in aviation before, English has now been adopted as the most common language. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) in the year 2003 issued the provision on English to be used especially for pilots and ATCs. The provision on the usage of English as a lingua franca was necessary to ensure that the communication flow did not get interrupted and warrant air transportation safety. Following the implementation of proficiency requirement for pilots and ATCs, other aviation stakeholders have also gradually adopted the provision to develop the proficiency of their employees.

Aviation Management

The AVM program was developed to support the expansion of the aviation industry (Marion et al., 2014). According to Marion et al., AVM personnel were required to be equipped to manage the air transport business before joining the evolving aviation industry. The term AVM refers to the relevant and much-needed skills required to coordinate aviation activities around the air transport industry, namely network management, fleet management, revenue management, human resource management, and operating performance management. Proficient AVM personnel are much required in the aviation entities listed in Figure 1.

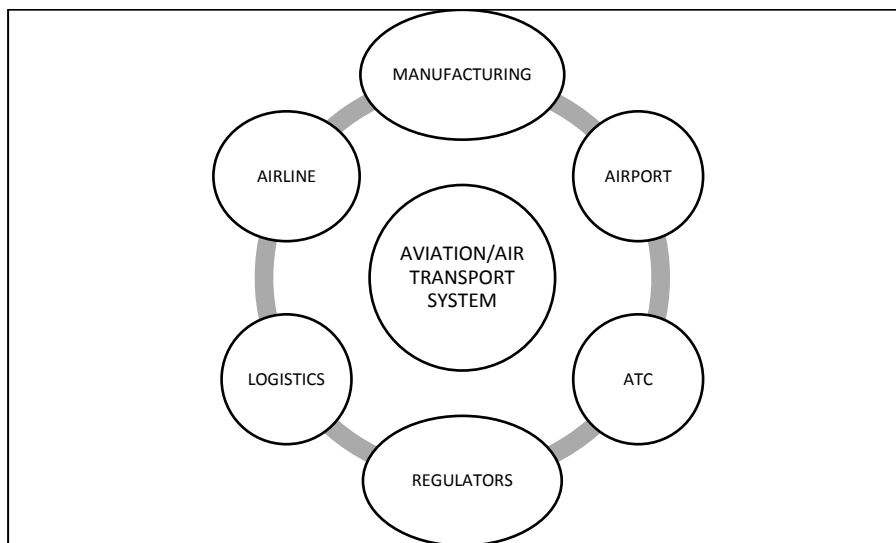


Figure 1. Aviation Industry Entities

The entities shown in figure 1 are the main support structures for the local and global air transport industry. The airlines provide air flight services, airports provide space and runway for aircraft movements, the ATC department coordinates with pilots to manage aircraft movement in the air, and the regulator regulates the safety and security of the aviation industry. On the other hand, the cargo and logistics company manages goods or wildlife and animals that are being imported or exported by air. For air transportation companies to cater to the demand from the growing number of passengers and cargo services and ensure the aviation industry continues to grow, the aircraft manufacturers are competing fiercely to manufacture aircraft with the best specifications. The aviation entities are all interconnected, and the organizations' management of the organizations' operations and businesses is managed by AVM personnel. Hence, efficient AVM personnel are much needed to fill in the positions of executives or managers to overlook matters related to managing the departments' activities, workforce, finance and other non-technical aspects.

The AVM personnel are also usually appointed to serve the administration departments such as operations control, human resources (HR), finance, quality assurance (QA), IT, customer service, logistics and cargo services, and regulatory bodies. Hence, the number of AVM personnel needed depends on the size of the respective organization. The primary responsibility of an AVM personnel is to manage the daily operations of the air transportation business and ensure smooth operations in the planning of flight operation schedules, overseeing aircraft purchase and maintenance matters, recruitment, airworthiness compliance, safety and security conformity, customer service and staff management.

A key aspect of managing aviation operations is the efficiency in managing communication. AVM personnel are expected to possess professional communication skills to represent their organizations in dealing with fellow employees and clients in a borderless environment. Therefore, AVM personnel must avoid any form of miscommunications, be it written or verbal. They should also avoid misapprehension of opinions and thoughts from others, as it may lead to delays or hazards (Venkatesan & Ravenell, 2011).

Since the aviation industry transports thousands of passengers from different regions with diverse native languages or accents in the present day, English proficiency has become the top priority. Hazrati (2015) raised a logical assumption that national differences amongst individuals can no longer be valid reasons that prohibit effective communication among aviation personnel. Therefore, the aviation community cannot deny the importance of English for communication purposes in the aviation industry.

Thus, if the English proficiency of the AVM personnel is poor, they may find it difficult to perform their duty effectively as all written documents in the aviation industry are in English. Hence, the English communication needs of AVM personnel have to be investigated to determine whether a special program needs to be designed to meet the industry's requirements and demands. This study attempts to analyze the spoken and written needs of AVM personnel in the aviation industry. The needs analysis (NA) investigates AVM personnel's spoken and written communication skills in the industry. The research is based on the frequency of activities performed using English as the primary language in the aviation industry.

English in the Aviation Industry

English language proficiency has become a concern among the aviation community even before the establishment of the language proficiency requirements (Kutz, 2000). Kutz also reported that aviation leaders had already acknowledged the importance of proficiency in communication in view of the air crash accidents and incidents that occurred as far back as in the 1980s and 1990s. They also recommended that good communication skills can be accomplished through basic writing skills (grammar, spelling and punctuation) and interpersonal relationships.

Since the announcement of the proficiency requirement, a considerable amount of literature was published on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in aviation. In previous literature on ESP in aviation, the communication scenarios in a hospital were thought to be the same as in aviation. Training of communication skills in both the industries is crucial for personnel involved in handling the operations and management. During turbulent situations, interactions between aviation operators and the management are essential because it often requires teams to communicate to resolve problems with other sections and with members from external agencies (Vieira, Cristina & Santos, 2010).

The evaluation or assessment for Pilots and ATCs proficiency includes the "speaking and listening ability" specified in Annex 1. The Holistic Descriptors and the Standards define details of the assessment for Operational Level 4 (please refer to the attachment). The holistic descriptors and the rating scale provide a general guideline for the English Language Proficiency (ELP) test developers to consider when designing test and proficiency training programs. These guidelines were erected based on the findings from reported accidents, incorrect use of standardized phraseologies, lack of plain language proficiency, and the use of more than one language in the same airspace. Based on these findings, the ESP approach was proposed over the traditional English Language Teaching (ELT) approach to develop test and training content for Pilots and ATCs. The conventional method of teaching English is all about mastering the grammar rules that may seem irrelevant if trainees cannot correlate the rules with their English communication skills.

ESP is a communicative approach to language training where the content of the course or program is related to the target learners' workplace or personal requirements. According to Basturkmen (2010), the main objective of ESP is to teach language and communication skills needed by a learner to function effectively in his or her respective field of study, workplace or profession. Nevertheless, the ESP approach can be exploited by trainers and material developers for other specific-purpose language programs.

In 2008, Beijing Capital International Airport Corporation made it obligatory for their Information Desk staff to undergo intensive English training. The Beijing International airport did not attain a high ranking despite being one of the busiest airports in the country. One of the issues highlighted is the poor English communication skills of the information desk staff at the airport. They are also required to communicate effectively in English with international passengers to help them feel at home during their stay at the airport (Ting, 2010).

Apart from the Information Desk staff, the flight attendants or cabin crew also frequently communicates with the passengers. They are considered as the brand ambassadors for the airlines they serve. Thus, they are required to converse well in English while serving passengers onboard (Xiaoqin & Wenzhong, 2016). Like other aviation personnel, flight attendants should ensure that their English proficiency is adequate not to cause any miscommunication when dealing with passengers onboard.

Thirdly, the development of proficiency assessments for airport ground crew was also reported necessary by Barbieri (2014). Barbieri stated that many airlines have begun assessing ground crew and the flight deck crew members as the ground crew also communicates with government agencies, manufacturers, service providers, and other international entities to ensure that operations are carried out accordingly.

Aviation English

Aviation English (AE) is a specific-purpose language training program whereby trainees share a common interest and motivation for learning the language. In AE training, learners must be provided with a wide variety of input because of human interactions, which is impossible to forecast. According to previous literature (Sirikanjanawong et al., 2018; Martin, 2016), AE includes speaking, writing, and apprehending English. Moreover, the training also includes a broad focus on aviation-related language input such as aviation meteorology, physics, navigation, maps and charts, electronics and avionics, instrumentation, hydraulics, air traffic control regulations, and air traffic control regulations phraseologies and general English. Aviation related language training is essential as it can influence learners' motivation and attitude in a program. The communication needs of each aviation personnel group are different, and thus, the required AE training needs to be different. But the common goal remains the same for all that is to ensure adequate proficiency in English to ensure that the lack of proficiency does not become a cause for miscommunications which may lead to unwanted incidents. Figure 2 displays the types of AE programs that have been developed for the aviation profession groups to date.

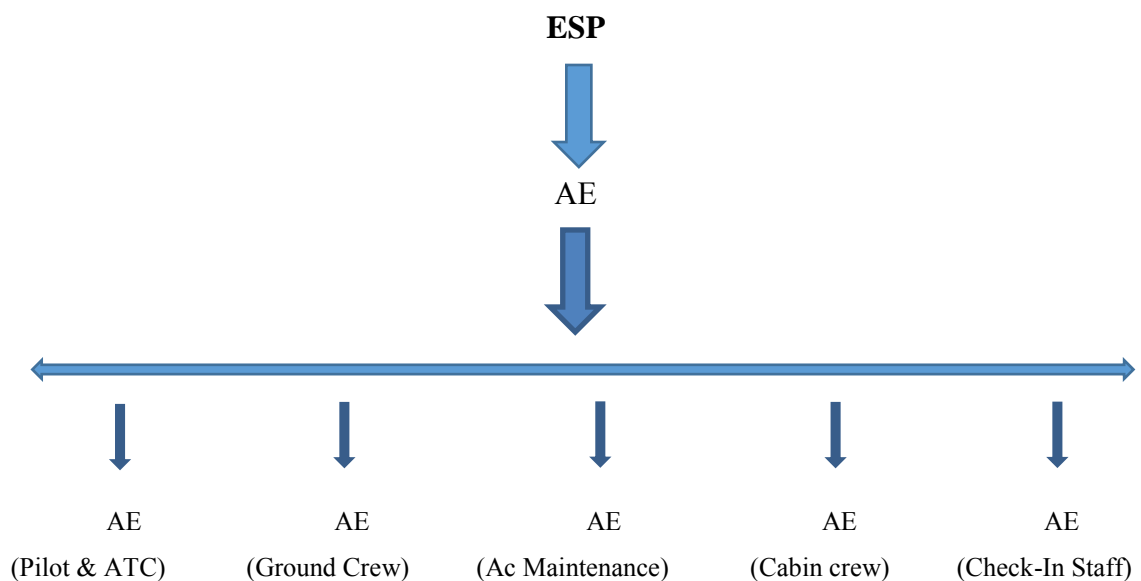


Figure 2. Types of Aviation English

As illustrated in Figure 2, several types of AE courses have been developed to date, and their related literature has been published in several countries. Although the AVM personnel play an extremely important role in the aviation industry, the literature on the communication needs, especially their required English language skills and development of AE courses for AVM personnel or trainees, is yet to be reported.

A study set out to determine the type of aviation topics in an ICAO-based blended learning program. The AVM students ascertained that it would be better to learn more about their targeted workplace (Parohinog & Meesri, 2015). The participants of this study included airline business, airport management and air cargo management, students. They also ranked airline, aircrew, airport, and aircraft-related content as the most significant topics they would like to learn during the ICAO proficiency blended learning program.

ESP practitioners apply NA to critically reflect learners' general and specific needs (Serafini & Torres, 2015). Trainees who are well equipped with the KSA (knowledge, skills and abilities) required by the industry or future workplace will secure their future employment. Language skills and the ability to communicate professionally in the field or profession are important aspects of KSA. Since no studies have presented the language needs of AVM trainees, it is about time a NA is conducted to determine the English language skills required by AVM trainees before deciding whether they require AE.

Hutchinson & Waters (1987) defined ESP as an approach to language learning. Thus, researchers and course developers need to investigate the required proficiency of language and the learning contexts based on the importance of need in ESP. One important aspect that needs to be addressed while investigating the AVM personnel's spoken and written communication level is the kind of activities that require English usage at their respective workplace or workstation. With this information, ESP course designers will be able to better comprehend the density and variety of communication tasks the trainees are expected to demonstrate before joining their future workplace.

Needs Analysis

The development of ESP courses has always considered NA as a key factor in the syllabus development process. The NA process involves "compiling information both on the individual or groups of individuals who are to learn a language and on the use which they are expected to make of it when they have learned it" (Richterich, 1983; Tahir, 2017). While carrying out the Target Situation Analysis (TSA), ESP researchers select the methodology that will assist during the data collection process. Furthermore, Hsu (2014) suggested that in order to capitalize on the efficiency of ESP course for Hotel and Tourism trainees, the NA of the students was necessary before initiating the curriculum design. She also employed NA to investigate the speaking and writing activities of AVM personnel.

According to Basturkmen (2010), NA involves TSA, which comprises the identification of tasks, activities, and skills that would require learners to use English and their readiness and ability. The instruments used in this study were designed to investigate the TSA of AVM personnel.

Method

This paper has been produced based on a PhD research on designing an ESP curriculum for AVM trainees. This study aims to determine the scope of English usage among the AVM personnel and examine the types of speaking and writing activities that AVM personnel should indulge in for workplace communication. The study includes qualitative and quantitative methods to generate the expected results. Hence, this study employed a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to obtain the necessary data. The interview respondents comprised of AVM personnel working in the local and foreign aviation companies located in the vicinity of the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA and KLIA 2). The respondents were randomly selected to provide information on their English communication needs and English proficiency requirement.

Respondents of the Study

The semi-structured interview and questionnaire survey study participants were AVM personnel serving in the airlines, airport, ATC academy and freighter company. The study involved participants from seven aviation organizations. These organizations were chosen based on a few criteria namely: (1) their status as an aviation organization, (2) collaboration between industry and training institution and (3) on-job training companies. The semi-structured interview involved 20 AVM personnel in obtaining insights based on their experience of using English to manage the daily operations at the airport, airline, ATC department and logistics department. Meanwhile, the questionnaire was used to collect more conclusive information on the frequency of English usage while performing the listed activities at the workplace. The purpose of administering a survey was to identify the tasks, activities, and skills that require learners to use English and assess their competency level. Thus, the respondents' anonymity and privacy were firmly respected, thus providing the personnel with sufficient freedom to answer.

Interview

To determine the communication needs of AVM personnel at their respective workplace, the first section of the interview prompted interviewees to talk about their sociocultural background and experiences in the aviation industry. One of the questions in this section was aimed to determine who they were communicating with in English while performing their duties.

Figure 3 illustrates the personnel or stakeholders that the AVM personnel need to communicate with at their workplace. Although English is a second language for most respondents, it is more commonly used in the aviation communication context than Bahasa Melayu, the national language of Malaysia. The use of English for communication by all the stakeholders reveals the importance of English as the main language used in the aviation industry. One of the participants commented that: *„Sometimes the announcements made via email are in dual language. However, most of the communication takes place in English. AVM personnel are required to use Bahasa Melayu for communication with government officials.*’ However, Bahasa Melayu is still used for official purposes involving government agencies.

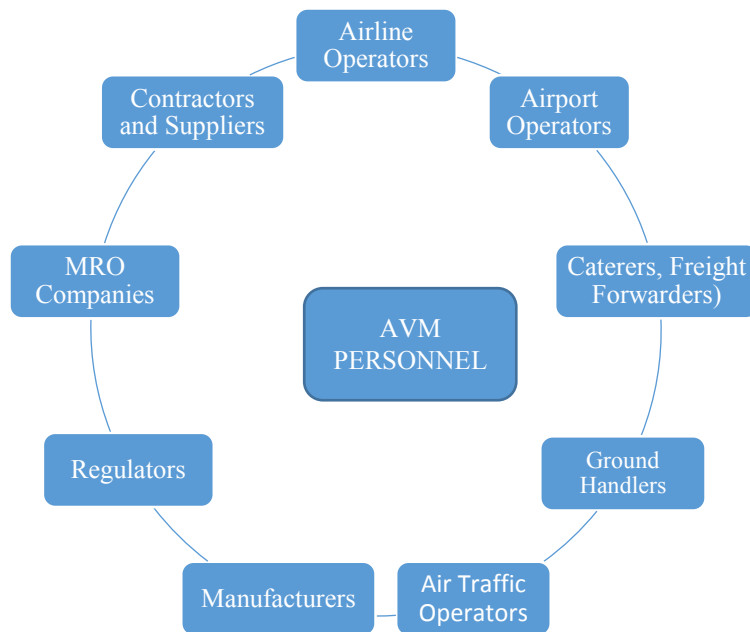


Figure 3. AVM Personnel Communication Circle

Besides confirming that the official language used for communication is English, the interviewer assessed their perception of English's importance while at work. Some of their views are as shown below.

“The mode of communication in aviation is English and ICAO has defined English language proficiency as one of the key skills required to manage unusual, non-routine and emergency” – (AVM Personnel 1, Engineering)

“Airline business is an international business. Hence, it requires English as the main medium of communication” – (AVM Personnel 11, Airline Station Manager)

“English is a requirement for this aviation industry. You will be dealing with not only local vendors or local authorities but you will be dealing with global vendors...global authority. So, English is very important even English is also become mandatory for communication in aviation industry” – (AVM Personnel 8 – Airline Purchasing)

“Our customers are just not locals, but our customers are also from foreign carriers like Emirates, British airways, Korean Air and Japan Airlines which requires us to listen to their requirements and provide excellent service – (AVM Personnel 9 – Catering)

“Because in the industry in order to go global we need to maintain English” – (AVM Personnel 14 – Air Traffic)

It is apparent from the collective statements that English communication needs are essential for AVM personnel to perform and sustain in the aviation industry. A majority of the respondents (70%) stated that English is

important based on the directives set by ICAO. Besides that, English communication skills are essential as most stakeholders such as manufacturers and airline operators are native or advanced English speakers. Having said that, one of the respondents stated that “*you need to be able to converse at a professional level like a native speaker but it doesn’t include the accent ...as long as you can speak and you will be able to comprehend and converse professionally in a business context*”- (AVM Personnel 6 – Airline). This comment revealed that the AVM trainees are not expected to use any accent but should converse professionally.

Based on the inputs mentioned above, the communication needs of AVM personnel are inclined towards the usage of English. Therefore, the last section of the interview seeks to investigate the AVM personnel's language skills for communication at the workplace.

*“Most importantly has the ability to **read**...now not every person that knows English knows how to read English...and understands the words out of a manual... now reading is...you know av business is like any other business...you have to read...you have to be able to enhance your skills and develop yourself everyday”..(AVM Personnel 7 – Freighter)*

*“They must have a good communication skills such as **speaking and listening skills**...because you negotiate to communicate with your staff, with your stakeholders or with your suppliers. You must have a good audience for your meetings because you must be able to convince your audience when you are trying to convey something”- (AVM Personnel 7 – Airline Station Assistant Manager)*

*“Second is good **writing** skills... we must have good command of language in formalities or in.. informal situation, and also have to adapt to different department requirement...for example, here people in Operations normally prefer short, precise & informative communication...or...to be... for example if you do a write up or report... you need to be short precise and informative” – (AVM Personnel 10 – Airline Customer Service)*

*“This covers **verbal and writing**...I think it is very common to know the unemployment rate in Malaysia is very high because of the culture and we are not in 1996 anymore where you can choose to just speak in certain language but even then.... language is also very important... when you talk about communication skills...It is not just about the language... you can speak in English but if you don’t know how to communicate properly in the language this still doesn’t work” – (AVM Personnel 6 – Human Resource)*

Based on the responses gathered from the interviews, the AVM personnel required to be proficient in speaking, reading, writing and listening skills to perform their tasks effectively. Although literature revealed that the pilots and ATCs’ speaking and listening proficiency assessment is crucial, the findings from the current interview session with the AVM personnel suggested that AVM trainees are required to be proficient in all four skills to ensure that they can communicate professionally and perform their tasks accordingly. Based on the frequency of responses, the most desired language skill was speaking and writing, followed by reading and listening.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire employed was adopted from a study on English for communication needs of Human Resource Development (HRD) trainees (Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012). The adapted questionnaire was piloted and validated by two experts; an AVM personnel and a language specialist. The questionnaire for this study consists of two parts. Part A included questions on respondents' profiles, while part B consisted of questions addressing the English proficiency needs of AVM trainees. The questionnaire was distributed to 7 aviation organizations, including local and foreign station managers and operations personnel. The questionnaire survey was administered via SurveyMonkey.com, and the link was shared to aviation personnel who were being interviewed. A total of 100 respondents completed the questionnaire. The number of participants involved in the questionnaire is relatively small. Several aviation organizations and AVM personnel are reserved for sharing information as aviation matters involve high-level security. The speaking and writing activities listed in the questionnaire were derived from the interview responses. Table 1 and Table 2 present the speaking and writing activities that the AVM personnel are engaged with while at work.

Table 1. Speaking Tasks that Require the Usage of English

No	Speaking Skills/ Frequency	Very Often %	Quite Often %	Rarely %	Not at all %
1	Discussing projects, proposals, plans and other matters	56	37	7	0
2	Reporting Problems	70	26	4	0
3	Making formal oral presentations for projects, proposals, plans and many others	56	33	11	0
4	Giving face-to-face instructions to subordinates	48	48	4	0
5	Speaking on the telephone with colleagues on job-related matters	63	15	22	0
6	Speaking on the telephone with clients on job-related matters	70	26	4	0
7	Establishing a social relationship with colleagues (subordinates and superior)	52	33	11	4
8	Establishing social relationship with clients	52	33	11	4
9	Providing training through discussion or workshop	63	22	15	0
10	Making arrangements	52	33	11	4
11	Taking part in meetings	63	22	15	0
12	Taking part in interviews	56	26	11	7
13	Dealing with orders	67	26	7	0
14	Dealing with forms	60	33	7	0
15	Making announcements	63	11	19	7
16	Presenting proposals and counterproposals	67	19	11	3
17	Negotiating with clients and stakeholders	74	19	7	0
18	Speaking at Press Conference	56	20	15	9

Table 2. Writing Tasks that Require the Usage of English

No	Writing Skills/ Frequency	Very Often %	Quite Often %	Rarely %	Not at All %
1	Taking notes	33	67	0	0
2	Writing letters	74	37	0	0
3	Summarizing information	63	26	11	0
4	Preparing forms	63	30	7	0
5	Sending emails	93	7	0	0
6	Writing memo	56	37	7	0
7	Writing reports	70	26	4	0
8	Writing meeting minutes	67	26	7	0
9	Filling up forms	63	22	15	0
10	Writing articles	52	15	26	2
11	Writing proposals	63	33	4	0

The abovementioned tables list the speaking and writing activities that were derived from the interview data. Table 2 indicated that approximately 70% of the respondents claimed that they were frequently engaged in at least three speaking activities. The activities include reporting problems (70%), speaking on the telephone with clients on job-related matters (70%) and negotiating with clients and stakeholders (74%). However, a small number of respondents stated that they rarely and do not use English at all while speaking at press conferences, making announcements and conducting interviews. On the other hand, the three writing activities that were perceived as very important by more than 70% of the AVM personnel include sending emails (93%), writing reports (70%) and writing letters (74%). On the contrary, a small number of respondents claimed that they rarely require English in report writing and proposal writing. This difference could be due to their responsibilities in their respective departments, which may not require them to prepare these documents in English. Interestingly, at least 90% of the AVM personnel regarded the usage of English as very often and quite often for the listed writing activities. Nevertheless, 10% of the respondents and below stated that these activities rarely or do not require the usage of English.

Conclusion

The underpinning factor to the growth of the global and local aviation industry is the workforce. Besides being knowledgeable and possessing relevant workforce skills, efficient communication skills are necessary to ensure that the AVM personnel can manage the business and operations of any aviation organizations (airlines, airports, regulators and other aviation departments). Based on the interviews conducted with the AVM personnel, it was evident that English is indeed the lingua franca in the aviation industry. Hence, for that reason alone, it is apparent that AVM trainees need to be equipped and prepared with strong foundations in English for aviation management before joining the workforce. Despite being the second language in Malaysia, the contention of English being the dominator language in the aviation industry is indisputable.

This study presented the English communication needs of AVM personnel based on speaking and writing activities at the workplace. Even though the AVM personnel are from the same industry as pilots, ATC and ground crew, speaking and writing skills are among the four crucial skills requiring attention by language teachers. In a nutshell, AVM personnel need English proficiency to communicate on aviation and business-related context such as during presentations, negotiations, meetings, networking and other forms of verbal communication. Moreover, they also need to be proficient in English to write emails, reports, proposal and letters.

Therefore, the findings from this study substantiated the claim that English proficiency is vital for AVM, especially for speaking and writing purposes, since the AVM personnel's communication is not limited to locals but also includes international stakeholders. The findings also recommended the need to design English for AVM program to enable prospective or future AVM personnel to communicate professionally. The noted unity in language and communication skills expectations identify the critical areas of study which need to be prioritized in designing the ESP curricula for AVM program.


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