

COMMUNICATION BARRIER IN MALAYSIA CONSTRUCTION SITES

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ABSTRACT

Language barrier is a type of communication barrier that has been agitating the stakeholders in the construction industry in Malaysia especially the supervisors and the foreign labours in the construction site. This is because almost all of the labours in the construction site are foreign labours coming from poor economic countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal due to the much lower pay than that of local labours. However, a lot of them cannot speak nor understand the local language that is understandable by their superiors. They take time to learn the local language in order to communicate with their superiors. The language barrier consequently leads to other problems such as delay and safety matters. Hence, it should be overcome for better productivity in the construction industry in future. In this study, literature review and field study have been carried out to identify the ways to overcome the language barrier between the foreign labours and the site management team in the construction site, the most preferable language to be used as the common language and the solution to improve the communication barrier. This is very informative if the industry is planning to take any steps to improve the communication problem that is currently faced. Improvement in the language barrier that improves the work productivity will surely improve the image of the construction industry as well. Other than that, this is not only applicable to only construction industry itself, but to other industries which are also using foreign workers in their production as well.

Key words: Communication Barrie, Malaysian Construction Sites, Foreign Workers, Site Supervisor

INTRODUCTION

Notes Desk (2009) defined communication as a process of exchanging information, ideas, thoughts, feelings and emotions through speech, signals, writing, or behavior. In communication process, a sender (encoder) encodes a message and then sends it using a medium/channel to the receiver (decoder) who decodes the message and sends back appropriate feedback/reply using a medium/channel after processing information.

Language barrier is a type of communication barrier that has been agitating the stakeholders in the construction industry in Malaysia especially the supervisors and the foreign labours in the construction site. This is because almost all of the labours in the construction site are foreign labours coming from poor economic countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal due to the much lower pay than that of local labours. However, a lot of them cannot speak nor understand the local language that is understandable by their superiors. They take time to learn the local language in order to communicate with their superiors. The language barrier consequently leads to other problems such as delay and safety matters. Hence, it should be overcome for better productivity in the construction industry in future. In this study, literature review and field study have been carried out to identify the ways to overcome the language barrier between the foreign labours and the site management team in the construction site, the most preferable language to be used as the common language and the solution to improve the communication barrier. This is very informative if the industry is planning to take any steps to improve the communication problem that is currently faced. Improvement in the language barrier that improves the work productivity will sure improve the image of the construction industry as well. Other than that, this is not only applicable to only construction industry itself, but to other industries which are also using foreign workers in their production as well.

METHODS

Questionnaire have been collected through the survey site .Then, the information was transferred into excel format whereby analyses were done by observing and explaining on the answers given by the respondents. Other than that, the researcher also used 5-points likert scale in the calculation to compare 2 elements as it can determine more accurate result.

Importance of Overcoming Language Barrier in the Construction Industry

According to Vázquez & Stalnaker (2004), the traditional safety training was somewhat “useless” for the immigrants who do not understand English, which indeed is the local language of the country. “English-speaking workers enjoy the benefits of learning from each other on the jobsite. Work briefings, safety meetings, and especially worker-to-worker observation and discussion help supplement formal classroom safety training. For Latinos, these learning opportunities are not as productive when the knowledgeable and experienced construction workers and supervisors speak only in English” (Vázquez & Stalnaker, 2004). This is very much similar to what have been experienced by the foreign labours in the Malaysian construction industry too.

A case example given by Vázquez & Stalnaker (2004) is, on a construction site where several systems had been turned over to operations, a lockout/tagout was needed to isolate a petroleum tank vent line before welding but the isolation valve was not shut due in part of a language barrier, causing an explosion and significant damage to the tank. Investigation found that a communication breakdown between the English-speaking operators and Spanish-speaking construction workers to be a contributing cause (Vázquez & Stalnaker, 2004). This is an obvious and serious matter that explains one of the reasons why it is important to overcome language barriers in order to improve safety.

“The inability to communicate properly also affects advancement opportunities. If an employer does not know an employee’s capabilities, and the employee cannot communicate then, s/he will likely be overlooked for advancement or given assignment below his/her level of capability” (Vázquez & Stalnaker, 2004). According to Margaret Cordova, an attorney specializing in civil litigation with emphasis on healthcare and employment disputes, efficient communication with Spanish-speaking workers results in lesser issues and employer liability (Vázquez & Stalnaker, 2004). Besides, Vázquez & Stalnaker (2004) also mentioned that classroom training is often not effective due to low literacy. On the other hand, hands-on training that requires demonstration of understanding is more effective to overcome literacy and language barriers where workers are shown, not told, how to work safely (Vázquez & Stalnaker, 2004).

Another case example given West (2010) is that none of the employees at the East Sun Building Pty Ltd spoke English and their supervisor was required to translate any instructions given on the construction project. However, the supervisor failed to advise the workers that they were not supposed to use the scaffolding at the premises as it was in a partially dismantled state and resulting in the injury of a worker. West (2010) also mentioned that through this case, all employers and safety professionals should be reminded of their obligations to ensure migrant workers understand safety procedures and their own occupational health and responsibilities.

Also, Parrie (2006) mentioned that word differences can make teaching a new skill even harder because of the different terms used by numerous nationalities. “Teaching it in another language, using words that may have four, five, or even six different meanings, can create chaos in a work environment” (Parrie, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The communication problem has to be improved in order to increase the productivity and efficiency of work as well as to improve safety in the construction site. The researcher suggested four methods to improve the communication barrier and the respondents were required to rank the methods from the most important to the least important. The results were tabulated in two bar charts in Figure 1.0 and Figure 1.1

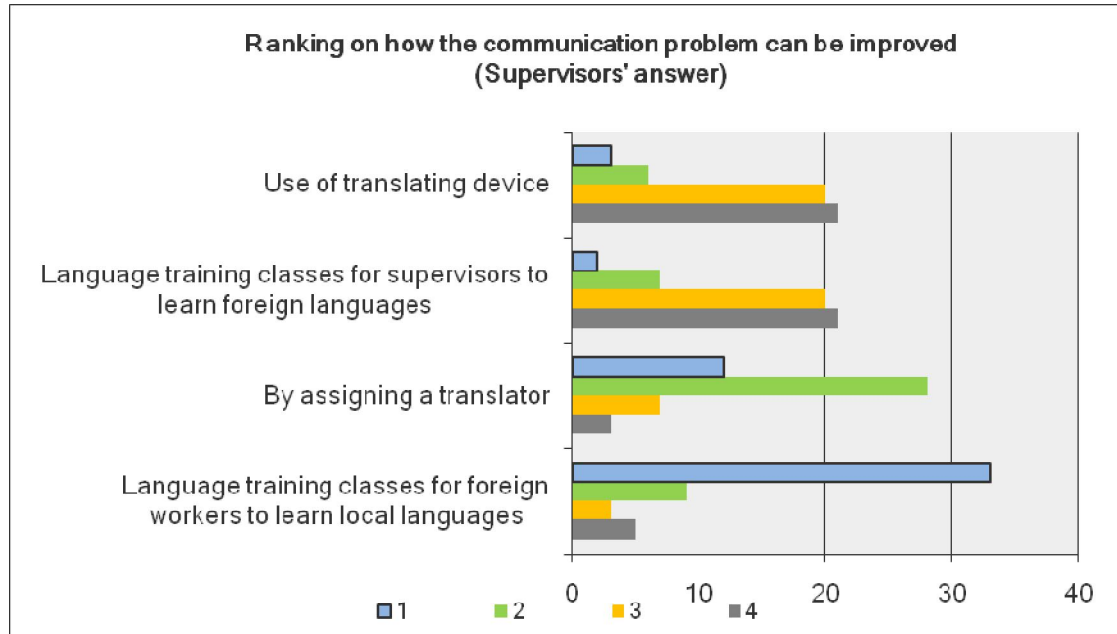


Figure 2.1: Ranking on How the Communication Barrier Can be Improved (Supervisors' answer)

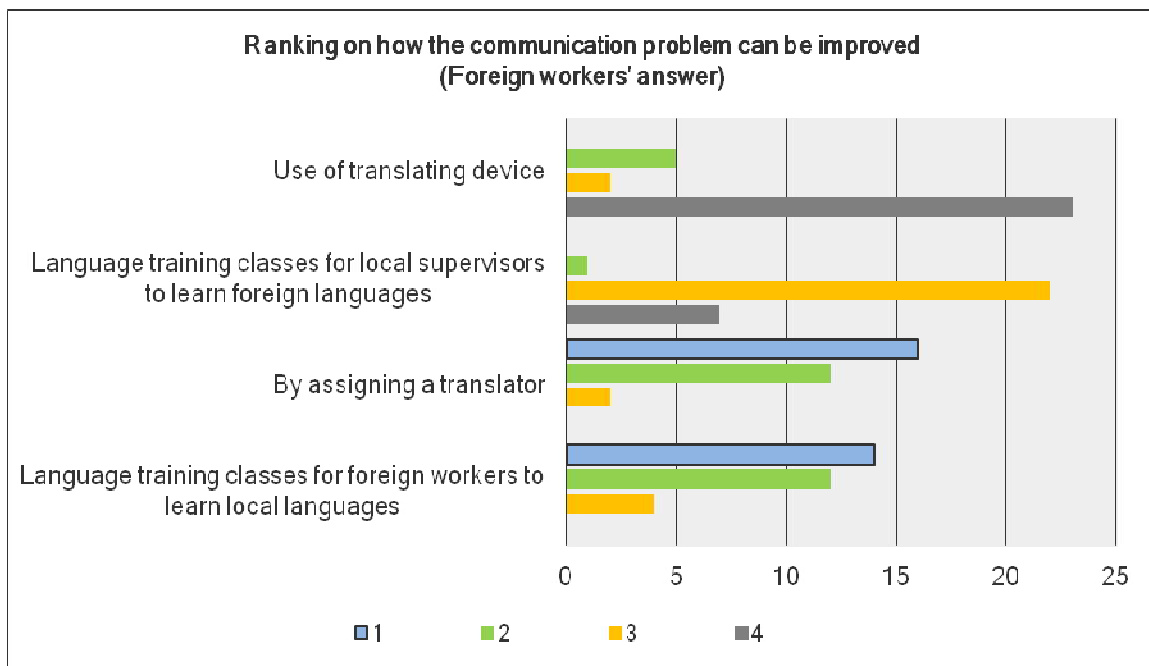


Figure 1.1: Ranking on How the Communication Barrier Can be Improved (Foreign workers' answer)

According to the bar chart in Figure 1.1, most of the supervisors ranked for language training classes for foreign workers to learn local languages as the first choice, followed by assigning a translator as the second choice. Use of translating device and language training classes for supervisors to learn foreign languages were equally obtained the highest rank for third and fourth choice.

As for the foreign workers, assigning a translator has the highest result for first ranking. It also has equally much votes for second ranking as language training classes for foreign workers to learn local languages. Majority of them ranked language training classes for local supervisors to learn foreign languages third and use of translating device as the fourth choice.

Use of translating device and language classes for supervisors to learn foreign languages have been lower ranked by the majority as they might think these two choices are not so practical as compared to the other two. Most of the respondents have never actually seen a translating device and do not even know the existence of such a technology. A translating device is a device that acts just like a translator where verbal and texts messages can be translated to another language. Figure 1.3 shows how a translating device looks like.



Figure 1.3: Translating Device

However, it may not produce perfectly accurate answers at all times especially verbal messages as different people may have different accents that may cause the device to detect the words wrongly. Language training classes for the supervisors to learn foreign language may be impractical as there are workers from so many different countries. It is impossible for the supervisors to learn all those languages and furthermore, it is time consuming. In conclusion, the best method mutually agreed by both categories is to conduct language training classes for the foreign site workers to learn the local languages.

Relationship between Age and Fluency of Foreign Site Workers

The researcher had tabulated the data of the number of foreign site workers according to their working experience in the construction industry against the fluency in speaking local language into the table shown in Table 2.1. Also, the index score of the data has been calculated using the conversion formula.

Working experience (years)	Fluency					Fluency score
	Unable to speak	Poor	Average	Fluent	Very fluent	
1-5	4	2	8	1	4	0.59
6-10	0	3	1	3	4	0.75

Table 2.1: Number of Respondents of Different Working Experience According to Fluency

Remark: N_5 = Number of respondents who are very fluent
 N_4 = Number of respondents who are fluent
 N_3 = Number of respondents who are average
 N_2 = Number of respondents who are poor
 N_1 = Number of respondents who are unable to speak

From the table, we can see that the fluency index for working experience range of 1-5 years is 0.59, which is average while the fluency index of working experience range of 6-10 years is 0.75, which is fluent. From the data, it can be seen that the fluency score of the range of 6-10 years is above average.

Besides, the percentage of respondents who are above average for both ranges can be compared. For the 1-5 years range, the percentage of above average is 26.3% whereas for the 6-10 years range is 63.6%. This shows that the workers with longer working experience are more fluent as compared to the workers with lesser working experience. With this information, it can be concluded that the longer the foreign workers are exposed to the local languages, the better they can speak.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study and primary data collection, the researcher found that the language barrier in the construction industry in Malaysia is still very serious. Language barrier is a type of communication barrier that is commonly faced in the construction industry in Malaysia nowadays due to the use of foreign site workers who are from poor economic countries, especially foreign workers from Bangladesh and Nepal who could not speak the local language. Consequently, this language barrier has lead to other problems especially in progress of the work and safety matters. Hence, it shall be overcome to improve the working environment.

The objectives of the research have been achieved by the researcher through the primary study and questionnaire survey. The commonest way to solve the language problem was through a translator where they asked for the help of another colleague who could understand the language of both communicating parties to be the middle person of the conversation and also using sign language including a little bit of demonstration on how the work should be done. The most commonly preferable language by both the supervisors and foreign workers is Bahasa Malaysia. The people facing the problem in the industry, who are the respondents of the study's survey, mutually agreed that this language problem can be improved by having language training classes for the foreign

workers to learn local languages especially those who are new in Malaysia and could not speak any of the language understandable by the local supervisors.

Recommendation

For improvement of the language problem for better working environment in the future, the researcher would like to suggest that the construction bodies such as the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) Malaysia, to conduct language training classes for the foreign labours who wants to work in the construction industry to learn Bahasa Malaysia. They can also include hands-on training to improve the work quality and safety knowledge of the foreign labours. This will benefit not only the stakeholders in the construction project, but also increase the safety level in the construction site.

In this study, the researcher only managed to attain respondents from a few states in Malaysia. Hence, in future, it is advisable that the study can be done upon more states and in a larger amount where the number of respondents is more equally distributed among each state to get more accurate results and better conclusion. Besides, the researcher could only gain 30 sets of response for the foreign labours' category which is a very minimal sample size and only from 3 different countries. Therefore, if the study is to be done in future, the number of respondents should be increased and on more respondents from different countries like Myanmar, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Philippines.

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