

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE USAGE IN THE WORKPLACE: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

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### Abstract

In today's global business world, English is essential for professional communication, especially in countries like Indonesia where it's not the first language. This study explores English language usage in Indonesian workplaces, the challenges employees encounter, and their motivation to improve proficiency. It aims to understand how English affects workplace dynamics and identify strategies to enhance communication. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, data were collected through a structured questionnaire completed by employees across various sectors. The 26-item instrument measured language use, perceived difficulties, attitudes, and motivation on a 5-point Likert scale. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to interpret the findings. Results indicate that receptive skills or comprehension skills (e.g., reading English documents) are used more frequently than productive skills or communicative skills (e.g., speaking in meetings). Participants reported moderate difficulties in expressing ideas and understanding accents, but showed strong awareness of English's importance and high motivation to improve. Additionally, there was a strong expectation for organizational support, such as training programs and communication policies. This study highlights the need for targeted interventions to bridge communication gaps and promote effective English usage. With high employee motivation and clear institutional demand, organizations have a valuable opportunity to strengthen their workforce's communicative competence and global competitiveness.

**Keywords:** English usage, workplace English, challenges

### INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, English has become a vital tool for communication in business environments worldwide. As the primary language for international trade, negotiations, and corporate correspondence, English proficiency is increasingly regarded as an essential skill in the workplace. Organizations that operate across borders or engage with global clients often require employees to use English for various tasks, from writing emails to participating in meetings and creating reports. This widespread need for English proficiency has significant implications for businesses, as it can influence productivity, employee morale, and competitive advantage (Neeley, 2012; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010).

Current research indicates that non-native English users often encounter significant language-related challenges in the workplace—ranging from misunderstanding colleagues to struggling with high-stakes business interactions. These barriers can undermine performance, erode confidence, and provoke stress or social alienation. Empirical analyses (Pitzl, 2005) show how communicative breakdowns in BELF (Business English as Lingua Franca) settings demand frequent negotiation and repair, while broader studies (Jenkins, 2014) suggest that adapting to

institutional norms in ELF environments can contribute to emotional and identity-based stress. Language proficiency disparities can also create communication gaps and misunderstandings, which may impact teamwork and customer relations. Understanding the extent of these challenges is crucial for organizations aiming to foster an inclusive work environment where employees can communicate effectively and perform their roles efficiently.

At the same time, more companies are realizing the importance of targeted strategies to enhance their employees' English proficiency. These strategies may include offering language training programs, establishing clear communication policies, or providing support resources such as translation services and language coaching. For instance, Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010) argue that adopting a lingua franca approach—where the emphasis is on effective communication rather than perfect grammar—can help alleviate some of the pressure associated with using English in professional settings. Consequently, this research aims to provide insights into how English is used in various workplaces, the challenges faced by employees, and potential strategies for enhancing language use to benefit both individuals and organizations.

By examining employees' perceptions of English usage and its implications for their workplaces, this study seeks to fill a gap in the current literature on business communication. The findings are expected to offer practical recommendations for improving English language practices in diverse professional contexts, contributing to a better understanding of the role of language in workplace dynamics and its impact on business outcomes.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges in using English in the workplace?
2. What strategies are there to enhance the use of English in the workplace?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of English in the workplace has grown substantially in the past decades, reflecting globalization and the expanding role of English as a lingua franca in business and professional settings. In many countries, including Indonesia, English is not only a foreign language but also a language that plays a crucial role in communication, economic growth, and international collaborations. This section reviews relevant literature on the use of English in the workplace, focusing on its functions, challenges faced by employees, and specific insights from the Indonesian context.

### ***The Role of English in the Workplace***

English is widely considered the global language of business, often serving as the main medium for international trade, diplomacy, science, and technology (Crystal, 2003). In multinational companies, English is commonly used as the official corporate language, even in non-English speaking countries. This phenomenon, known as English as a Business Lingua Franca (BELF), positions English as the default mode of communication, particularly in cross-cultural or international interactions (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005).

In Indonesia, English is not an official language, yet it is regarded as an essential skill for career advancement and organizational success. A study by Renandya, Hamied & Nurkamto, (2018) found that English proficiency is often a requirement for employment in major sectors, such as tourism, finance, and education, where interaction with foreign clients or documents written in English is prevalent. English is also used for training programs, internal communications within multinational companies, and accessing global knowledge sources.

### ***The Functions of English in Professional Settings***

The use of English in the workplace is multifaceted, encompassing a variety of functions, such as communication with international clients and partners, access to information and knowledge sharing, and professional development and training. Many organizations in Indonesia use English for emails, presentations, negotiations, and meetings, especially when dealing with foreign clients or partners (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). English serves as a bridge language that facilitates clear and direct communication across linguistic boundaries. Moreover, the vast majority of technical documents, research articles, and industry-specific publications are in English. English proficiency is essential for accessing current global developments and facilitating cross-border information exchange among international businesses—this is evident in Indonesian companies where English underpins internal knowledge sharing across diverse teams (Susanti & Rahmawati, 2018). Moreover, many professional training programs in Indonesia use English as the medium of instruction, particularly in international-standard workshops and internal courses. For example, English training for daily workers at the Fairmont Hotel Jakarta significantly boosted employee performance (Setia Asih et al., 2024)

### ***Challenges Faced in Using English at Work***

Despite its benefits, using English in the workplace presents several challenges for employees, particularly in non-English speaking countries like Indonesia. These challenges include limited proficiency levels, anxiety and communication apprehension, and cultural context misunderstandings. A significant portion of the workforce may lack the necessary language skills, which can affect their job performance and limit their career growth. A survey by TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) revealed that the average English proficiency in

Indonesia is below the global average, which could hinder effective communication in business contexts (ETS, 2019). This result might be a factor affecting employees' confidence in using English in their workplaces. Consequently, it can cause anxiety and apprehension in communication. Employees who are not confident in their English skills may experience anxiety, especially during oral communication tasks, such as meetings and presentations (Tsui, 1996). This anxiety can result in hesitation, miscommunication, or even avoidance of English use in the workplace. Another barrier is cultural and context misunderstandings. Since English is not the native language for many employees, misunderstandings can arise due to cultural differences and lack of contextual knowledge. The use of idiomatic expressions, jargon, or culturally specific references in English can be confusing or misinterpreted by non-native speakers (Hofstede, 2011).

Several case studies highlight the use of English in various Indonesian workplace settings, illustrating both the benefits and challenges. For instance, in her study, Ariyati (2022) examines front-office staff at Bali hotels and underscores how English is essential for greeting, check-in/out, providing information, and resolving issues. It also highlights recurring barriers such as limited vocabulary, accent comprehension, and grammatical confidence. The study suggest that targeted training is needed. Furthermore, Syaraya, Herawati and -Hidayati (2019) examine employees at a company in South Jakarta, where English is required for communication with foreign employers. The study highlights barriers such as lack of vocabulary, weak listening skills, and passive spoken English.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a quantitative research approach to investigate the patterns of English language usage, challenges, attitudes, and motivation among employees in various workplace settings. Data were primarily collected through a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed based on established theoretical frameworks concerning second language acquisition and workplace communication, incorporating Likert-scale items to measure perceptions and experiences quantitatively.

### **Research Design**

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design. This design was selected to gather data from a diverse group of employees at a single point in time, allowing for the identification of current perceptions, practices, and challenges related to English language use in their professional environment. The quantitative approach facilitated the collection of numerical data, which was then analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify prevalent patterns and trends. The survey aimed to identify commonalities and divergences across various sectors regarding the necessity and application of English skills for effective workplace communication and career progression (John et

al., 2021). The cross-sectional nature of the study design further allowed for a broad snapshot of the linguistic landscape across different industries, enabling comparisons between sectors regarding the perceived importance of English proficiency and the prevalent communication modalities (Glomo-Narzoles & Glomo-Palermo, 2021).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, which was designed to assess employees' English language usage, perceived challenges, attitudes towards English, and motivation for improvement in the workplace. The questionnaire consisted of 26 items primarily utilizing a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., 1 = Never, 5 = Always for frequency; 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree for attitudes/motivation).

The survey was administered online via Google Forms over a period of one month from June 17<sup>th</sup> to July 18<sup>th</sup> 2025. Anonymity and confidentiality of participant responses were ensured. Prior to participation, all respondents were informed about the study's purpose and provided their informed consent.

### Data Analysis

All collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, medians, modes, and standard deviations, were computed for each Likert-scale item and for overall constructs (e.g., English language usage, challenges, attitudes, motivation). These statistics were used to summarize the questionnaire results, identify patterns, and provide a general interpretation of the findings related to English usage across different workplace settings

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The survey involved Likert-scale responses from employees regarding their English language use, challenges, attitudes, and motivation in the workplace. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted for 26 items. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for key statements related to English usage, challenges, and attitudes.

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics of Key Statements

No	Statement	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	General Interpretation
1	Use of English in emails	3.10	3.0	3.0	1.24	Occasionally used
2	Use of English in formal meetings	2.47	2.0	2.0	1.04	Rarely used, needs improvement
3	Use of English to read documents	3.67	4.0	4.0	0.96	Tends to be frequent
4	Difficulty expressing ideas in English	3.10	3.0	3.0	0.96	Many sometimes experience difficulties
5	Understanding the importance of English use	4.47	5.0	5.0	0.86	Very high understanding
6	Support for English usage policy	4.07	4.5	5.0	1.08	Generally supportive

7	Desire to improve English proficiency	4.57	5.0	5.0	0.73	Very high motivation
8	Expectation of company support for English development	4.40	5.0	5.0	0.89	Very high expectation for support

### ***English Language Usage in the Workplace***

The findings indicate moderate levels of English usage in daily work activities. The use of English in writing emails ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) and reports ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) falls into the “sometimes” category. However, usage in formal meetings ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) and informal discussions ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) is notably lower. In contrast, reading English documents scored relatively higher ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), suggesting receptive skills are used more frequently than productive ones.

### ***Challenges in Using English***

Participants reported moderate difficulties in expressing ideas ( $M = 3.10$ ), understanding accents ( $M = 3.07$ ), and writing formal documents ( $M = 2.67$ ). These scores indicate that while challenges exist, they are not extreme but consistent across various tasks.

### ***Attitudes and Motivation Toward English Use***

Respondents demonstrated strong agreement with the importance of English at work ( $M = 4.47$ ), positive influence on job performance ( $M = 4.43$ ), and support for English-related policies ( $M = 4.07$ ). There is also high motivation to improve English skills ( $M = 4.57$ ) and expectation for institutional support ( $M = 4.40$ ). These scores suggest a readiness for skill development and policy reinforcement.

## **Discussion**

The data indicate that while English is moderately used in written and receptive tasks, its use in spoken contexts such as meetings and discussions remains limited. This mirrors findings from workplace ELF research, such as DeBartolo (2016), which shows that multilingual professionals often engage more with receptive language skills (reading, listening) than with productive skills (speaking, writing). For instance, studies on English as a Lingua Franca environments highlight that while email communication often relies on written English, spontaneous spoken interactions might be minimized or navigated through other linguistic resources if confidence is low (DeBartolo, 2016). This dynamic suggests a practical adaptation where individuals utilize their stronger skills while potentially avoiding situations that demand higher proficiency in more challenging modalities.

The reported challenges—particularly in expressing ideas and understanding accents—highlight the persistent gap in communicative competence, especially in spontaneous spoken interaction. The strict adherence to native-speaker norms is less critical than achieving mutual intelligibility and adaptability. However, our findings suggest that even within this framework, the difficulties in conveying nuanced ideas or navigating diverse accents can impede effective

communication and potentially lead to misunderstandings or reduced participation. This aligns with research indicating that perceived communication barriers, even when minor, can contribute to lower engagement and increased stress for non-native English speakers in professional contexts (e.g., Seidlhofer, 2011). Language anxiety (LA) manifests as negative emotional responses when using or understanding a language, affecting proficiency and communication skills (Kim et al., 2024). These challenges underscore the need for communication strategies that prioritize clarity and active listening over accent conformity.

Despite these obstacles, the findings show that employees are not only aware of the importance of English in their professional context but are also highly motivated to improve. The high scores in items related to motivation and expectation for support resonate strongly with Gardner's integrative motivation theory (2010), which posits that learners who identify with the value of the target language and its community are more driven to master it. In the workplace, this "community" can be interpreted as the global professional landscape, where English proficiency is often a prerequisite for advancement and broader collaboration. Furthermore, these results also align with instrumental motivation, where learners are driven by practical benefits such as career progression, access to information, or improved job performance [Dörnyei's motivational theories]. The strong desire for skill development reflects a pragmatic understanding among employees of English as a crucial human capital asset in today's interconnected professional world.

Importantly, the pronounced desire for institutional support suggests the critical need for a structured internal language policy and regular training programs. This supports Zhu's (2024) argument that corporate language policies and incentives can significantly boost confidence and workplace efficiency. Without clear organizational backing, individual motivation, while high, may not translate into tangible proficiency gains. Research in organizational development consistently demonstrates that investments in employee training and development, particularly in critical skills like language, directly correlate with improved employee satisfaction, retention, and ultimately, organizational productivity and competitiveness. Providing targeted interventions, such as tailored workshops focusing on specific communicative tasks (e.g., formal meeting discourse, technical report writing), could effectively bridge the gap between perceived importance and actual usage, fostering a more linguistically confident and productive workforce.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the patterns of English language usage, the challenges encountered, and the attitudes and motivation of employees towards English proficiency in their professional environments. The findings reveal a nuanced picture: while receptive English skills (e.g., reading documents) are frequently utilized, productive skills, particularly in spoken contexts like formal



meetings, show lower engagement. This disparity points to a common pattern in multilingual settings where communication demands shape skill application.

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrate a strong understanding of English's importance in the workplace and exhibit high motivation to enhance their proficiency. This positive attitude, coupled with a clear expectation for organizational support, underscores a readiness among employees for targeted language development initiatives. The challenges identified, such as expressing ideas and understanding diverse accents, highlight specific areas where communicative competence can be further strengthened.

In conclusion, the study affirms the critical role of English in contemporary professional settings and highlights the significant potential for improvement through strategic interventions. Organizations are encouraged to leverage the high intrinsic motivation of their employees by implementing structured language policies and providing accessible, task-specific training programs. Such support is crucial not only for addressing existing communication gaps but also for fostering a more linguistically confident and globally competitive workforce, ultimately contributing to enhanced organizational effectiveness.

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