'Pleasant' or 'Tough' Communication at the University

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Communication is the most important aspect in our life. Two-third or more of our daily life involves communication. Hence, in order to have an excellent institution and to promote harmonious at a workplace, effective communication plays a vital role. In this study, the issue is focussed on the communication between the English language (EL) teaching staff and their superiors at one of the local universities in Malaysia. The major concern of the research is to explore the methods used by the superiors to disseminate information to the English language teaching staff, besides, to investigate the staff's perceptions about their communication with the superiors. The participants of the study were 40 English language teaching staff who completed the online questionnaire and four of them volunteered to participate in the interview. The findings revealed that various methods were used to convey the message from the superiors to the subordinates. In addition, the majority of the participants claimed that the superiors communicated well although some messages were reached them through grapevine.

1. Introduction

Communication is the process of sharing ideas, information, and messages with others in a particular time and place. Communication includes writing and talking, as well as nonverbal communication (such as facial expressions, body language, or gestures), visual communication (the use of images or pictures, such as painting, photography, video or film) and electronic communication (telephone calls, electronic mail, cable television, or satellite broadcasts). Communication is a vital part of personal life and is also important in business, education, and any other situations where people encounter each other. In our daily lives, we need friends to communicate with; for security, comfort, and friendship.

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2. Background of Study

There are so many means of communication to convey messages between staff, be it vertically or horizontally. These can involve face to face, formal or informal discussions, internal memos, letters, emails, telephone calls, Whatsapp group discussion or even Whatsapp personal messages and many others. In these days messages could be passed through various mediums especially with the existence of social media.

The study was conducted at one of the local universities in Malaysia. At the university, especially at the centre where the study was conducted, all the above mentioned medium of communication are used to convey messages either upwards or downwards.

3. Statement of Problem

Based upon conversations among the teaching staff, this study is important because there appears to be a lack of communication within the organization. Some of the staff feel as though the superiors have daily meetings, but no information is shared regarding the department changes and/or procedures. When there is an internal communication gap, it becomes difficult for anyone to effectively achieve goals. The teaching staff and/or the head of department (HOD) main responsibility is to relay information to the customers with whom the organization serve. If changes are not shared with the employees, then they may risk the chance of giving the students incorrect information. There will also be inconsistencies among the clerks when handling telephone and/or written inquiries. Communication between the EL superiors and the subordinates or vice-versa at times can be very difficult at the department or even at the centre level.

4. Research Questions

1.   What are the methods used by the superiors at the centre to disseminate information to the English language teaching staff?
2.   What are the perceptions of the English language teaching staff about their communication with the superiors?

5. Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not there is an internal communication gap that exist between the teaching staff and the supervisors. The two objectives of this study are to: 1) Identify the ways in which employees usually receive most of their information. 2) Examine the perceptions of the English language teaching staff level about their communication with superiors.

6. Literature Review

Communication barriers can happen at every stage of the communication process (which consists of sender, message, channel, receiver, feedback and context) and have the potential to create misunderstanding and confusion. To be an effective communicator and to get an individual's point across without misunderstanding and confusion, one goal should be to lessen the frequency of these barriers at each stage of this process with clear, concise, accurate, well planned communications.

The development of a strategic internal communication strategy and its implementation can provide a number of benefits to organizations, such as keeping employees motivated and engaged,

and sharing clear, consistent messages with employees in a timely manner. An organization, whatever its size, mission, or motive is merely a collection of people assembled to pursue a common objective. An organization functions through its people, who in turn function through communication [7]. Employees have their own sources, their own information system, separate from the management channels. These usually carry the news ahead of communications from management, not that the employee network is flawless, that system transmits information indiscriminately. Rumours or gossips may not always operate in the best interests of the organization, but it may provide point when information is not passed down clearly. Furthermore, it enables employees to participate in the communication process, and it fills their need for information which at least seems to come from a credible source: another employee [1]. Employees, like all people, require channels for their thoughts and feelings.

Employees may be expressing themselves through other channels: meetings with fellow employees, union representatives, and government agents; or through passive-aggressive behaviour such as work slowdowns, carelessness, tardiness, absenteeism, and apathy. These can be symptoms that employees feel other means of participation are unavailable to them [1]. The skill of listening becomes extremely important when we talk about "upward communication." There are many avenues through which management can send messages downward through a business organization, but there are few avenues for movement of information in the upward direction [6].

One's effectiveness in employing the attributes of leadership and the strengths of a company is enhanced by one's aptitude for communication. When leaders and managers are better understood and appreciated, they are followed and supported [4]. Many popular theories on workplace communication focus on the differences between men and women, suggesting that the sexual divide causes communication to break down. Women are seen as being more empathetic and oblique than men. Other variables that cause people to mix their messages include differences in age, culture, and socioeconomic background.

According to Clernons [3], some tips to help managers bridge any communication gap were: 1) Listen actively for the subtext of people's words; 2) Persuade rather than command; 3) Target your words to your audience; 4) React to content, not to people's manner of expressing themselves; 5) Let people know that criticism is welcome; 6) Make your intentions clear before acting; and 7) Assume that people take responsibility for what they say. Unclear communication not only results in errors and missed deadlines, but also lies at the root of many other serious workplace issues, such as low employee morale and poor job performance.

7. Methodology
7.1 Research Design

The research design of the study was informed by the research questions. Additionally, this study is a mixed-method study, i.e. using quantitative and qualitative, to determine if there is a gap in the communication at the university. According to Schoonenboom and Johnson [5], the ultimate purpose of mixed method research is to strengthen the research study and its conclusion. In addition, this is an exploratory study in nature and informed by the interpretive paradigm.

7.2 Research Site

The study was conducted at one of the public universities in Malaysia.

7.3 Sample

The sampling method used in this study is purposive sampling, which is aimed to obtain a group of respondents with certain characteristics and also to achieve the objective of the study based on the needs of the researchers [8]. The department has more than 40 EL teaching staff among whom are holding posts at the department; either as the dean, deputy dean and also the head of department.

7.4 Instrument

A survey was distributed through Google Form. The participants were given a duration of five days to complete the questionnaire. Some questions were revised in order to meet the objectives of the research. The questionnaire consisted of five multiple choices single answer, eight multiple choices multiple answers, and two open-ended questions. The participants were asked single answer questions to discover the preferred methods of communication between the staff and the superiors. The multiple answers questions were meant to collect information on whether or not there was any internal communication gap between the superiors and the staff and to determine the perceptions of the EL staff about their communication with the superiors.

At the end of the survey, a question was asked asking for volunteers' names and contact numbers for interviews to be arranged to better understand the situation under study.

7.5 Interview

Interviews were conducted with 5 teaching staff who had agreed to be contacted later after they answered the questionnaire.

8. Findings and Discussion

The present study was conducted to achieve the two objectives which are: 1) to identify the ways in which employees usually receive most of their information, and 2) to determine the EL teaching staff perceptions of their immediate superiors level of communication. Table 1 below illustrates the answers to the research questions one.

Based on Table 1, 36% of the respondents agreed that they received the information about the centre or the university from their immediate superior such as the HOD or the dean, 27% said they received information through gravevine, whilst, 19% agreed they were informed through the university emails. Based on the interview, Teaching Staff (TS) 1 agreed that she may have missed some important information because she did not read the email:

> There are times when I was so busy with my research work that I missed reading departmental emails. (TS1)

> We have Whatsapp group for the teaching staff with the course coordinator. My coordinator often update us about the centre. (TS5)

In the following, Table 2, 3 and 4 illustrates the answers to research question 2.

Table 1
Sources of communication usually received about the department

Item Response	Frequency	%
Grapevine	11	27
Bulletin Board	0	0
Centre Newsletter (Intranet)	0	0
My immediate superior	14	36
Unit leader (E.g. Course coordinator)	2	5
Group discussions	2	5
University Programmes	3	8
University emails	8	19

N = 40

Table 2
EL teaching staff's level of satisfaction with the communications within the organization

Item Response	Frequency	%
Very satisfied	1	3
Satisfied	13	30
Neutral	23	58
Very dissatisfied	2	6
Unable to identify answer	1	3

N = 40

Based on Table 2, 58% of the respondents opted for 'Neutral' when asked about their satisfaction with the communication in the organization. However, 33% fall into very satisfied and satisfied, whist, 9% fall into very dissatisfied and unable to identify answer. Meanwhile, based on the interview, when asked regarding this matter, these were discovered:

> Honestly, sometimes I am a bit lost and felt disappointed with the management because information was a bit slow. (TS3)

> To me, I am fine. If I did not receive the wanted information, I will ask the HOD straightaway. (TS4)

Table 3
EL teaching staff's confidence about the management considering their ideas and/or concerns

Item Response	Frequency	%
All the time	4	12
Some of the time	11	24
Undecided	17	40
Almost never	7	21
Never	1	3

N=40

Based on Table 3 above, 40% of the respondents opted for 'Undecided' when asked about their confidence with the management. However, 36% fall into all the time and some of the time confident, whist, 24% fall into almost never and never felt confident. Meanwhile, based on the interview, when asked regarding this matter, these were discovered:

> I often feel afraid to voice out my opinion, yeah maybe because I am worried my ideas may be rejected. (TS2)

> So far I have no problem in giving ideas. As far as communication is concerned, the management is very open about their staff sharing their ideas especially for the betterment of the centre. (TS5)

Table 4
The supervisors' action whenever there is a change within the organization

Item Response	Frequency	%
Always inform me	9	27
Inform me most of the time	21	43
Almost never informs me	7	21
Never informs me	2	6
Unable to identify answer	1	3

N=40

Based on Table 4 above, 70% of the respondents selected 'always inform me' and 'inform me most of the time' when asked about the superiors' action whenever there is change within the organization. On the other hand, only 30% of the respondents selected 'almost never informs me', 'never informs me' and 'unable to identify their answer'. Meanwhile, based on the interview, when asked regarding this matter, these were discovered:

> In most instances, I am kept informed about the changes in the centre. (TS1)

There was once when I did not receive the email from the centre calling for a meeting and resulting to my absence for the meeting. There were things that I missed and were not informed. (TS5)

9. Conclusion

A lack of communication within an organization can decrease productivity, lower moral and be the cause of other serious workplace issues as illustrated in the study. The researcher found that the outcome of the survey was the complete opposite to what was overheard in previous conversations. Based upon the answers given on the survey, more people were neutral and/or thought that the communication was satisfactory within the organization. Majority of the participants also felt that their superiors' communication skills were very good.

Acknowledgments

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