



English for Business Communication: An Interventional Study with Employees of Indian Printing Industry at Sivakasi

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Abstract

English is a universal language that is popular for business purposes worldwide. The impact of English communication has influenced businesses around the world. This includes the printing industry. As far as India is concerned, Sivakasi is the heart of the country's printing industry and accounts for the highest number of printing machines in the world, only next to Gutenberg, Germany. It produces 60% of India's offset printing with around 50,000 printing industry workers. From bank cheque books to air ticket printing, all kinds of printing activities are carried out by the workers, and the current growth rate of this industry at Sivakasi is 10%. Though the workers are skilled at all types of printing, they lack English proficiency even at a

basic level. This leads to a difference between the customer's needs and the printing industry's output. The expected quality of the work is highly retarded, despite the effort put in by the employees. The current research is driven by the endeavour to overcome this problem. The study adopts a statistical analysis of the data collected from the informants. Initially, the informants of the research, who are the employees of the printing industry, are assessed to understand their level of Business English proficiency. This assessment is done in the form of a questionnaire survey. The answers are recorded, and the frequency noted for each skill, which provides an understanding of the level of Business English proficiency of the printing industry employees. Then, an interventional English training is conducted targeting the enhancement of the listening, reading, writing and speaking skills of the participants. Following this, an assessment is done similar to prior to the intervention, and the results are once again recorded in terms of frequency. These two sets of data are to get a proper understanding of the effectiveness of the training on the employees. The final outcome shows that the listening, reading and writing skills of the employees improved as a result of the intervention, but not the speaking skills, which requires more efforts to be taken to improve, both from the trainer and the employees' end and hence, requires more time to acquire than listening, reading and writing skills. Consequently, it is concluded that relevant training can help the employees overcome this issue leading to better professional results for the employees.

Keywords: *Business English, English for Specific Purpose, Printing Industry, Intervention Programme, LSRW*

Introduction

Globalization leads to the growth of a technology or a product worldwide, and it is, in fact, the sharing of anything worldwide. It is attributed to the sharing of information in one way or the other. The world today has shrunk to a global village, and hence, arises the need for Business Lingua Franca or BELF (Roshid, Web, & Chawdhury, 2018; Thavabalan, Mohan, Hariharasudan, & Joanna, 2020). Since English is an international language, people from non-English speaking countries try to attain proficiency in English. They interact with their clients in English (Hariharasudan et al., 2017; Thavabalan, Hariharasudan, & Mohan, 2018) and for efficient communication they seek proper support (Krzywda, 2019). This kind of interaction is always of vital importance, especially when the clients are present in countries outside the company location (Prachanant, 2012). English as a Business Lingua Franca enables the employees of an organization for better interaction with the customers (Roshid et al., 2018;

Thavabalan et al., 2020) and the development of the same. In fact, for many decades now, English has become a bridge for the transmission of ideas and ideologies, and ideas that originate in one place are disseminated to other regions owing to English. As a result of the expansion and growth of businesses, the language has become the preferred lingua franca for global interaction (Hariharasudan & Kot, 2018).

The prominent role of BELF has also seen its effects in the printing agencies of countries. Unlike many other industries, the role of communication is of vital importance as it is more widespread than the manufacturing industry. The printing industry has a big share in the Indian economy given the sheer number of people. Sivakasi is a city in the state of Tamil Nadu in the south of India, which has the lion's share in India's printing output, especially offset printing (Thavabalan et al., 2020). Sixty percent of India's printing works is done in this city, and the net worth of its printing industry is 139\$ million, which is a huge amount. The printing industry employees in the city work as an energetic population, working tirelessly, contributing to the nation's output. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, nicknamed the Sivakasi Printing industry as 'Mini Japan' given its sheer expanse (Cherukara & Manalel, 2007).

The clients of the Sivakasi printing industry start include locals as well as international individuals and institutions. As far as the locals are concerned, language as a medium of conversation never poses a problem. However, once the barrier of the location comes, language has its own role to play. The industry has more of a conventional communication between its employees and clients. However, greater proficiency in business communication is desirable in this industry because its very nature has to do with communication since the aim of printed materials is primarily to communicate. Since the employees of the industry of Sivakasi have continuous interaction with their clients every single day, the quality of the communication has a vital role to play in business, as it is a part of business communication ethics. For this reason, there comes the need for the assessment of the business communication skills of the employees of the printing industry. This is an unexplored region of research work as discussed in the literature review since no such research has been conducted before concerning the English proficiency of the employees of the printing industry. This research is quintessential for the assessment of English not only as a language of interaction with the non-native language speakers, but also, the ability or the extent to which the extraction of the idea of the client is passing through, which is given as an output of the employees of the South Indian city of Sivakasi. Though conducted in Sivakasi, this research is relevant to any business

communication in English as used by the non-native users, such as the ability to listen to details, the proficiency in the delivery appropriate sentences or words, the ability to read in the language and the verbal delivery of words in written format. This analysis of the basic skills of proficiency in Business English at Sivakasi is expected to positively influence the management of the company to understand the level of proficiency of Business English which is the base of their business with clients who do not belong strictly to this city. Moreover, based on the assessment results, intervention training is given to the employees to equip them with the skills they need. After the successful completion of the business proficiency training, the results are again analyzed to measure the effects of the intervention.

Literature Review

Irrespective of the words spoken, the ideas and the ideologies of people reach the rest of the world and bind them all, leaving behind the linguistic differences (Voinea, Busa, Opran, & Vladutescu, 2015). The influence of communication is formidable on human interactions. A proper output from the employees can be attributed to efficacious commanding and interaction (Stacho, Stachová, Papula, Papulová, & Kohnová, 2019). English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Seidlhofer, 2013) is the choice of English by non-native speakers of English as a common language for communication with no other option (Seidlhofer, 2006).

English started to grow its roots in India ever since India was colonised by the British, and hence it found inroads throughout India in all the business whether of government and private ownership (Azam, Chin, & Parakash, 2013). The development of any business, basically, lies in the English speaking ability of its employees. Further, a study by Azam et al. (2013) concluded that fluency in speaking in English is directly related to increased earnings, and this rate stands at 32% as of 2013.

Understanding the necessity of English as a language for business communication or the Business Lingua Franca (BELF), researches have been conducted by Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranra,(2005); Gerritsen & Nickerson (2009); Charles & Marschan-Pierkkari(2002); and Akar (2002) . In Malaysia, in order to understand the indispensable need for English in the work environment, Ting (2002) conducted a study that proved that the employees found it very hard to face the needs of the clients owing to deficient communication in English, and when this unmanageable difficulty arises, the client satisfaction becomes unfavourable to the organisation.

Millot (2017) conducted a study to understand communication with professionalism on an online platform. E-mail is the major source of online communication, by then it has been analysed. The samples were collected. Around 500 e-mails and 15 professionals were involved in the study who used English for communication. The result of the study showed that proven communication skills were all the way essential for the advancement of business. Hence, the professional English speakers outweighed the rest of them, exhibiting the contribution of professional English communication in the business.

In 2018, a similar study was conducted by Roshid et al. (2018). They collected samples with the email messages from professional English speaking employees with respect to the international clients as the base and analysed them. The organisation was related to the clothing industry producing readymade dresses located in Bangladesh. Both qualitative and the quantitative studies were undertaken, and the results provided insights into the relevance of business communication.

The study of Chan (2019) is considered a unique one as compared to all the other relevant studies to date. His research work mainly dealt with professional English speaking employees. The author researched the change in employees' language with regard to the posts they held and the barriers they faced with regard to the developments in business environments. The author also studied their struggle and how they overcame the same. The results of the research proved that a futuristic estimation of the needs of the corresponding business gives insights into the necessity of Business English, which can be tackled with research in English for Specific Purpose (ESP) and the role of the institutions for advanced studies.

English as a Lingua Franca Core (.Levis, 2001) or the so called BELF was studied by Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2012). Once again, in 2013, a similar study was conducted by Kankaanranta and Salminen (2013). The results of both studies proved that BELF and ELF are similar in their application and composition.

As discussed above, various researches have been conducted studies to prove the vitality of English in the advancement of businesses. The results of such studies proved that Business English is indispensable for the employees of an organisation, and a deficiency in these proves to be detrimental to the growth of business in the industry. None of the studies discussed above, however, are placed in the Indian context, though India is today a formidable world economy.

Hence, there arises the need for such research in the Indian context for which Sivakasi is the most suitable place as it provides significant support for the Indian printing industry as a whole.

Methodology

Purpose and participants of the study

The aim of this study is to understand the vitality of BELF with regard to the employees of printing industry employees based in Sivakasi. The core objective is to understand the usage of Business English and assess the same with the basic proficiency before and after an interventional English training of employees.

The study was conducted on the employees of the printing industry of Sivakasi, which is the hub of printing industry in India. The participants were the employees of Sivakasi printing industry. Sixty printing units were identified in the city, and 10 random employees were chosen from each unit, accounting for 600 workers. These printing units are reportedly responsible for the printing of 70% of the offset printing undertaken in Sivakasi. They print notebooks, textbooks, bank passbooks, airline tickets, letter pads, visiting cards, invitation cards, notices, etc. Apart from printing, they also export the items to their clients internationally. The participants chosen were in the age bracket of 29 to 45. The respondents comprised 420 males and 180 females, having work experience in industry between three to 15 years.

Instruments used in the study

A questionnaire was administered to the participants to identify the setbacks in basic proficiency in Business English. The questionnaire was multiple-choice with an open-ended question, a checklist and a 5-point Likert scale to elicit data from the participants. The questionnaire items were purposely designed in both English and Tamil (the local language of Sivakasi), for an in-depth understanding of the proficiency level. The questionnaire was checked for validity by two professors, one each from the Statistics and English departments. It was checked for reliability via a pilot study with 10 participants. Requisite adjustments were made in the instrument before it was administered to the sample. The reliability coefficient at .9517 and .9511 were considerably high. This proves that the instruments used for the purpose of data collection were authentic and acceptable.

Data collection and analysis

The data were collected over a period of three months between December 2020 and February 2021 which included a month-long intervention in the form of Business English training, and questionnaires administered before and after the intervention. As stated earlier, the number of participants was 600 across sixty printing units in Sivakasi.

Upon collecting the questionnaires, the collected data were subjected to analysis using the following:

1. Cronbach Alpha coefficient: To ensure the authenticity of the questionnaire used in the study
2. 5-point Likert scale: To evaluate the degree required to assess Business English proficiency. The range was marked based upon the scale summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1.
Five point Likert Scale criteria

Mean range	4.5-5.0	3.50-4.49	2.50-3.49	1.50-2.49	1.00-1.49
Scale	5	4	3	2	1
Level	Highest	High	Moderate	Low	Lowest

3. Standard Deviation (SD) and Mean (\bar{x})- To compute the average Business English required. Here (\bar{x}) represents the highest mean which shows a higher need for Business English proficient employees, and SD represents the splitting of points among the participants.
4. Frequency (f) and percentage (%): To find the drawbacks and functions of the application of Business English by the employees of the printing industry.

Results

All responses were clubbed under eleven themes on which the questionnaire items were based.

Business English and Basic Proficiency Skills of Employees

In the survey, the participants were asked to prioritize the four basic English proficiency skills with respect to their requirement in business communication. The results are tabulated, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Prioritization of Basic English Proficiency skills

Sl. No	Skills	Standard Deviation	\bar{x}	Level	Ranking
1	Listening	1.43	4.40	High	2
2	Reading	1.70	4.00	High	3
3	Writing	1.67	3.70	High	4
4	Speaking	1.10	4.42	High	1

Table 2 shows the importance of basic English proficiency skills in the perception of the workers in the printing industry. According to their order prioritization, speaking was the first one, followed by listening, reading, and writing skills, in that order. Clearly, the workforce is aware of the importance of speaking in English in boosting business.

Business English and the Employees of the Industry

The participants were asked if they required Business English in their communication. If answering in the affirmative, the participants were asked to select any one of the three responses that supported their answer. The data received from the participants were analyzed, and the calculated frequency and percentage are represented in Table 3 below.

Table 3.

Categorization of the purpose of Business English Skill

Sl. No	Purpose of Business English Skill	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
1	Enquiring the need	450	25
2	Clarifying the doubts	342	19
3	Providing suggestions	108	6
4	Clearing misunderstanding	90	5
5	Providing support	108	6
6	Sorting out client issues	180	10
7	Giving confidence in their work	126	7
8	Providing relevant explanation	396	22

Table 3 shows that the most important reasons for the employees to be proficient in basic Business English skills are: Enquiring the need, providing relevant explanation, and clarifying the doubts. The frequency and percentage of enquiring the need is $f=450$ at 25%; for providing relevant explanation, $f=396$ at 22%; for clarifying the doubts, $f=342$ at 19%. It can also be

seen that the rate is low for providing suggestions, clearing misunderstandings, providing support, sorting out client issues and providing confidence in their work.

Hurdles Involved in Business English Communication

In this section, the hurdles involved in the business English communication of the employees of the printing industry in Sivakasi are discussed. Like any other field, communication plays a vital role in printing too, and business communication is of utmost importance to the employees who handle the work. Therefore, if the basic English language proficiency skills are improved, the employees can do better business leading to the advancement of the printing industry.

Assessment of the Participants before the Interventional English Training

The employees of the printing industry were given questionnaires to answer. The responses were recorded in terms of frequency to get a proper understanding of the obstacles they faced while using the business English skills, and then, an interventional English training program was conducted. The recorded frequencies were tabulated with the corresponding percentages. Analysis of the results gave insights into the objectives of the paper. Tables 4 to 7 show the results.

Assessment of Listening Skill

Table 4.

Hurdles in Listening to Business English

Sl. No	Hurdle	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
1	Fast speaking of clients	102	17
2	Limited vocabulary of listener	126	21
3	Inability to understand the meaning of sentences	114	19
4	Inability to understand the pronunciation	228	38
5	Listening habit of the listener	30	5

Table 4 interprets the hurdles of the employees of the printing industry in listening to the business English communication of the clients. Of all the hurdles, the most significant one is the inability to understand the pronunciation, and it has a frequency of 228 at 38%. Similarly, the least possible hurdle is the listening ability of the employees which stands at a frequency of 30 at 5%.

Assessment of Speaking Skill

Table 5.

Hurdles in speaking Business English

Sl. No	Hurdle	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
1	Wrong pronunciations	36	6
2	Irrelevant usages of words and phrases	222	37
3	Grammar mistakes	150	25
4	Distrust on own communication	48	8
5	Fear of making mistakes while speaking	60	10

Table 5 represents the hurdles faced by the employees of the printing industry in using business English to speak to their clients. The most frequent problem faced in speaking Business English is the irrelevant usage of words with $f= 222$ at 37%. Similarly, the least reported hurdle is wrong pronunciation, with $f= 36$ at 6%.

Assessment of Reading Skill

Table 6.

Hurdles in Reading Business English

Sl. No	Hurdle	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
1	Reading long lines	216	36
2	Educational background	48	8
3	Poor vocabulary	222	37
4	Emotional instability	72	12
5	Tongue twisting problem	42	7

Table 6 represents the hurdles faced by the employees of the printing industry in reading Business English. The most reported problem faced in reading English is poor vocabulary with $f= 222$ at 37%. Similarly, the least reported hurdle is the tongue-twisting problem, with $f= 42$ at 7%.

Assessment of Writing Skill

Table 7.

Hurdles in Writing Business English

Sl. No	Hurdle	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
1	Lack of grammar knowledge	108	18
2	Poor vocabulary	90	15

3	Lack of experience in writing	72	12
4	Awkward phrasing of words	234	39
5	Difficulty in the structuring of sentences	96	16

Table 7 represents the hurdles faced by the employees of the printing industry in writing Business English. The most significant problem reported in writing Business English is the awkward phrasing of words with $f= 234$ at 39%. Similarly, the least reported hurdle is the lack of writing experience with $f= 72$ at 12%.

Assessment of the Participants after the Intervention English Training

An interventional Business English training was given to the employees after the preliminary assessment. The content of the interventional program was based upon the problems/ obstacles that were most frequently reported in the preliminary survey summarized above. Upon completion of the training, a new assessment of the business English speaking skills was done on the printing industry employees and the results were formulated in terms of a table in the case of each of the skills involved.

Assessment of Listening Skill

Table 8.

Hurdles in Listening to Business English

Sl. No	Hurdle	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
1	Fast speaking of clients	126	21
2	Limited vocabulary of listener	138	23
3	Inability to understand the meaning of sentences	144	24
4	Inability to understand the pronunciation	174	29
5	Listening habit of the listener	18	3

Table 8 shows that all the hurdles earlier reported in listening have reduced, especially, the listening habits of the listeners which is the least reported hurdle, having reduced to a frequency of 18 at 3%.

Assessment of Speaking Skill

Table 9.

Hurdles in Speaking Business English

Sl. No	Hurdle	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
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1	Wrong pronunciations	42	7
2	Irrelevant usages of words and phrases	156	26
3	Grammar mistakes	144	24
4	Distrust on own communication	54	9
5	Fear of making mistakes while speaking	72	12

Table 9 shows that the improvements in all the areas are not as desired. This includes the most cited hurdle and the least cited one, which show only marginal improvement.

Assessment of Reading Skill

Table 10.

Hurdles in Reading Business English

Sl. No	Hurdle	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
1	Reading long lines	126	21
2	Educational background	138	23
3	Poor vocabulary	174	29
4	Emotional instability	138	23
5	Tongue twisting problem	144	24

Table 10 shows that all the employees have shown improvement in all the areas.

Assessment of Writing Skill

Table 11.

Hurdles in Writing Business English

Sl. No	Hurdle	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
1	Lack of grammar knowledge	120	14
2	Poor vocabulary	120	18
3	Lack of experience in writing	120	23
4	Awkward phrasing of words	120	26
5	Difficulty in structuring of sentences	120	19

Table 11 shows that the participants have shown improvement in all the areas analyzed.

Discussion

The survey results indicate that the Sivakasi printing industry employees are aware that basic English proficiency skills are essential for better business communication that is essential for

interaction with customers or with the clients from other countries too. The assessments before and after interventional English training showed that speaking skills have shown only marginal improvement as compared to the other skills as a result of the intervention. The results prove that priority must be given to speaking skills. This research is more like the research of Prachanant (2012), which dealt with the workforce of the travel and tourism industry of Thailand. As per the study, the vital skill involved in the travel and tourism industry is speaking compared to the other skills. The current study too concludes that speaking is an important skill from the perspective of business. However, some studies have proven that speaking is not the most desirable English skill in some contexts. One example is the study of Evans (2010) in Hong Kong. In Thailand, since most of the communication between the client and the employees is done using email communication, writing business English is the preferred skill rather than speaking (Hiranburana, 2017). Further, a study by Hariharasudan, Gnanamony, & Rajaram (2017) among the engineers of ten transnational companies revealed that speaking is the skill which is of utmost importance as compared to the others skills in business communication. Moreover, as far as engineers are concerned, it concluded that speaking was the most preferred skill of in the workplace. In addition, the results of the research gave insights into the business English communication training of the engineers, which will eventually pave the way for the advancement of their career at an international level. Thus, it is pertinent to conclude that only the needs of a given business or industry can decide which English language skill is of the greatest importance.

As far as the current research is concerned, it is conducted in a city of Tamil Nadu, which makes the highest contribution of any printing industry. The contribution of the Sivakasi industry is 60% of the entire offset printing industry of India. The printing work is done not only for inland customers, but also for international customers. Hence, export is also a significant revenue generator of the Sivakasi printing industry (Thavabalan et al., 2020). The result of this study shows that before and after interventional Business English training, there are significant improvements in listening, reading and writing which shows that interventional training can prove to be beneficial for the printing industry employees. However, speaking did not show enhancement after the training though the employees reported that speaking was a skill, which they prioritized over the other business English skills. This is because it is difficult to train oneself and the interaction with the client is the base for the Business to develop.

Conclusion

The research aims to get an in-depth analysis of the structure, requirements and difficulties in the Basic English proficiency skills of the employees of printing industry in the context of business communication. The current study was conducted on 60 printing units of the city of Sivakasi located in the south of India. There were 600 participants in this survey design study. For more clarity in collecting data, proper monitoring and doubt clarification were done on the spot of supplying and collecting the questionnaires. As a result, it was found that basic English proficiency skills are important to business English communication for proper interactions with clients inland and internationally. The required basic English proficiency skills were analyzed and prioritized. The first and foremost skill essential in the perception for the workforce of the printing industry is found to be speaking followed by listening, reading and writing. Interventional business English training resulted in improvement in the proficiency of all the four skills though speaking, perceived as the most important skill by this workforce, was the one least enhanced. In speaking skills, instead of the expected improvement, what recorded was a marginal variation of the results, which proved that just an intervention English training program could not improve the speaking skills in business English. So, more training is necessary for the improvement of the corresponding skill. Though extended research was conducted in line with the aim, it has its own restrictions too. Since Sivakasi is the hotspot of the Indian printing industry, the authors have conducted research within this city as the base. However, there are many other cities, though they make a little lower contribution, they have their own unique business communication style. Furthermore, as far as the participants are concerned, the researchers have undertaken a wide perspective with a wide base of employees. This, however, is also a drawback as there was little scope for in-depth interaction with the workers in the study. Since the printing workers are the base of the industry, a fair interpretation of the data given by them relating the obstacles and needs they perceive for better business communication must be assessed in particular. The current research is concerned with the employees of the printing industry of Sivakasi. All over India, we have thousands of printing units with lakhs of employees. The outcomes of the research can be utilized in the development of useful, need-based vocational training modules for developing the basic English proficiency skills of the skilled workforce. Also, curriculum developers and policymakers can take steps regarding mandatory business English proficiency training in schools and colleges. Further, future research can be undertaken in line with the findings of this research with interventional programs for the industry employed workforce.

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