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**LANGUAGE FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN MALAYSIA**  
**CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY**

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**Abstract**

Delays in the completion of projects are often related to communication errors in the transmission and interpretation of instructions at the construction site. It is well known that most construction firms use foreign labour on these projects as they are cheaper and available in greater numbers. The purpose of this study is to determine how such communication problems affect progress in the completion of a construction project. In particular, the effectiveness of using an interpreter as a mediator in giving site instructions to foreign construction workers is examined. In this context, the term “interpreter” refers to a person who is also a foreign worker but is responsible for giving instructions to other foreign workers. In order to test the hypothesis that inaccurate information during handover may affect project progress, an online survey was distributed to various construction companies in Malaysia. The respondents (civil engineers) from different states in Malaysia were asked to answer questions related to the issues in this research. The findings revealed that several companies have concerns about timely project completion, especially when they rely on foreign workers as interpreters to convey instructions at the construction site. These findings suggest that foreign workers (interpreters and intermediaries) need to be adequately trained, especially in the handling of important information that, if passed on incorrectly, could jeopardize meeting project deadlines. On this basis, adequate communication courses for interpreters should be provided before the start of a project.

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## 1. Introduction

Communication is viewed as a fundamental instrument in mingling and imparting information. The method involved with conveying messages from sender to collector can be completed verbally or non-verbally. In its authentic significance, communication includes articulating one's thoughts (a thought, an impression, of sentiments) and other revealing relationships with the World (Tomescu-Dumitrescu, 2016). In the construction industry, precise and brief information is essential in guaranteeing that a venture runs undisturbed. It is exceptionally fundamental in construction projects where most cycles rely upon communication quality (Renault & Agumba, 2016).

Communication is characterized as an interaction involving trading data, news, information, and guidelines between two individuals (Radosavljevic & Bennett, 2012). Communication is essential when most development debates are because of break or deficient correspondence among colleagues (Olanrewaju et al., 2017). Poor exchange in information (communication) regularly prompts plan issues, prompting deferrals and low quality (Olanrewaju et al., 2017). In conveying, affirming, and trading fundamental information regarding a construction project, appropriate consideration is needed from legitimate language mediators on site.

Interpreters (mediators) play a significant part in the construction industry in receiving instructions from site engineers and dispersing them to other foreign general workers. Harikrishnan and Manoharan (2016) mentioned that project reports, formal communication, and team meeting discussions were among the significant communication channels related to problems in the construction industry. If interpreters were to convey the wrong information or instruction on-site, it would dearly cause problems. Besides, insufficient revealing and the absence of accurate information during communication stages (Dainty et al., 2006) are likewise among the project problems. Other than the work scope as an interpreter, individual ascribes like poor communication abilities influence the advancement of an undertaking project (Emuze & James, 2013).

Besides the issues experienced in communication, it could likewise affect other problems, which could prompt other critical issues and ultimately influence a project's achievement pace. As per Laihonon et al. (2014), the absence of successful communication between authorities could bring about a hostile encounter. In the end, this could influence the time span of a task. Abdul Rahman et al. (2013) later upheld this, where poor communication overwhelms projects. In addition, because of issues looked in communication, it could likewise rapid changes in cost invade, which could be less gainful to all parties (Mydin et al., 2014).

### 1.1. Importance of Communication in Construction

Communication and construction project are a package deal, where without proper and effective communication, there would be a breakdown in the project which would lead to misunderstanding that could be costly. According to Titus and Brochner (2005), coordination of work is impossible without proper communication where the chain of information is not present in the organization. In a construction project, there are various activities that need to be completed by the participants to achieve the project objectives such as collaborate, share, collate and integrate vast amount of information. Therefore,

according to Ishaq et al. (2019), good strategies in communication is imperative to establish, cultivate and maintain a strong working relationship while working on heavy construction projects.

Other than that, it is also important to discuss the importance of effective communication between the client and the contractor because this will determine not only the completion time of the construction project but also the cost and quality of it. Goh et al. (2014) states that for communication to be effective in construction projects, the information should not be unnecessarily duplicated and the whole project team should be given access to the most updated information for the project.

### **1.2. Language Barrier in Construction Industry**

However, language barrier becomes a problem in construction projects when it involves foreign workers. According to Wei and Yazdanifard (2015), it has become a problem in the Malaysian construction industry, where their access to English language is not adequate enough to carry out the instructions provided by the supervisors. This proves to be a hindrance because there are different layers of communication that needs to be tackled.

However, it is also important to recognize that because there are multiple nationalities in a project team, the standard of instruction delivery is not as clear-cut as differentiating those who are fluent in English language and those who are not fluent in the language. Rather, according to Tutt et al (2011), there are multiple underlying channels of communication to ensure successful delivery of instruction to maintain a functioning team. It was further discussed that safe working practice for foreign workers depends on context and there are no standardized practices that can resolve the issue of language barrier other than acknowledging the need to promote localized interpretation such as tailoring the communication content to address and communicate effectively with specific team members. Therefore, even though the foreign workers might not be fluent in English language, as long as they are given proper instructions to complete the tasks, it is already a specific form of communication that gets the job done successfully.

### **1.3. Interpreters as Intermediary at Construction Sites**

The main purpose of translating is the delivery of ideas and events to enable the other party to understand in order to accomplish a task or prove their understanding (Köksal & Yürük, 2020). They further emphasized that it is important for translators or interpreters to fill the role of breaking down language barriers. Therefore, as discussed by Tutt et al. (2011), translators and interpreters play a key role in enabling communication between foreign workers and their counterparts. However, most of the time, according to Shepherd et al. (2021), companies rely on trainee translators during training session. Trainee translators are usually one of the workers with slightly better grasp of the target language to relay safety information accurately during training, site inductions and daily safety briefing. This is problematic as the accuracy of the information being communicated cannot be confirmed by both counterparts. Amirah et al. (2017) suggested that the use of translators or interpreters for each group of foreign workers can help make the construction site safer and it can also increase safety awareness which may then ease on-site accidents.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Construction companies have always been struggling to complete projects according to the agreed duration. Problems in miscommunication at construction sites have somewhat affected the progress of any project. Hence, overcoming the language barrier among foreign general workers will improve work productivity and build a good image of the construction industry (Raju & Harinarayana, 2016). Some construction companies have utilized interpreters as mediators for delivering site instructions to foreign general workers, but this method is yet to have any significant effect or turnout.

## **3. Research Question**

The use of interpreters as mediators for delivering site instructions to foreign general workers has yet to prove any company's ability to finish a project on time. From previous studies, many projects have been delayed due to miscommunication. Addressing this issue will have a practical benefit.

- i. What are the criteria for choosing an interpreter used by most construction developers?
- ii. How effectively does the said interpreter able to deliver site instructions?

## **4. Purpose of the study**

This research aims to investigate the effectiveness of using interpreters as mediators in delivery site instructions. This study works as an extension to the previous discussion on communicative barriers in the construction industry (Ne'matullah et al., 2021a) and the impact of communication on work productivity in the construction industry (Ne'matullah et al., 2021b). This article will identify the most significant factors in choosing an interpreter and whether by using such service, a project can be completed on time.

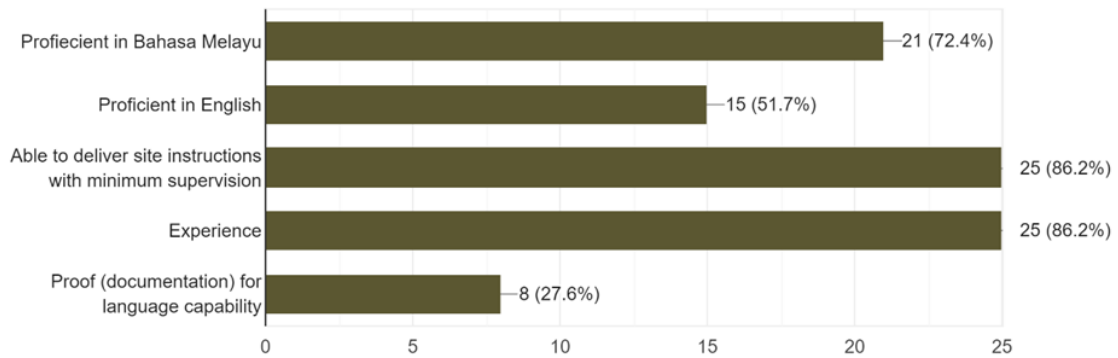
## **5. Research Methods**

For the research design of this study, survey research was used. The questionnaire was constructed based on inquiries to 29 companies (civil) and reviews from literature. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms, which was carried out through the use of social media. Online survey tools have become standard data collection instruments in the network environment today (Raju & Harinarayana, 2016). Invitations to surveys were sent to respondents to get their comments on the transmission of the language among interpreters to other foreign workers on construction sites. The collected data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software to calculate the survey questions' mean scores and standard deviations. The survey results are displayed in tabular form according to specific sections.

## **6. Findings**

Figure 1 shows the criteria used by construction companies in selecting a foreign general worker as a mediator or interpreter. Five main criteria identified from past literature are the most prominent

reasons for appointing a mediator or interpreter at the construction site to convey instruction to fellow foreign workers. The five criteria are shown in Figure 1. Respondents were required to choose one or more relevant in selecting the mediator or interpreter to smoothen the delivery of instruction at their respective construction site.



**Figure 1.** Criteria for selecting a Foreign General Worker as Mediator/Interpreter

Based on Figure 1, 86.2% of construction developers stated that the ability to deliver site instructions with minimum supervision and past experience had become the main criteria in selecting a mediator or interpreter to coordinate a project. The proof of documentation for language capability has generated the least percentage. Only 27.6% of construction developers felt it might be a helpful judging criterion in selecting a foreign general worker as mediator or interpreter. On the contrary, the foreign general worker's ability to communicate proficiently in Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) jotted 72.4% as compared to 51.7% of construction developers who felt a mediator or interpreter should be proficient in English language at the construction site.

Table 1 below shows construction developers' perception of the effectiveness of using interpreters in delivery site instructions. A total of 10 of 29 respondents (34.5%) had chosen *Always*, while 9 of 29 respondents (31%) stated *Never* in using Foreign General Worker Interpreter (FGWI). The question, 'Does your company use FGWI to deliver construction site instructions to other foreign general workers?' shows a mixed perception among the construction developers. The mean score indicated 3.21 with SD=1.719.

**Table 1.** Effectiveness of using interpreters in delivery site instructions

Items	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Frequently	Always	Mean	Std. Deviation
Does your company use FGWI for delivering construction site instructions to other foreign general workers?	9 31%	2 6.9%	2 6.9%	6 20.7%	10 34.5%	3.21	1.719
When using FGWI as your mediator, are the site instructions given clearly to the foreign general workers by the FGWI?	6 20.7%	3 10.3%	8 27.6%	8 27.6%	4 13.8%	3.03	1.349
Do you trust FGWI in delivering construction site instructions to other foreign general workers?	5 17.3%	1 3.4%	9 31%	9 31%	5 17.3%	3.28	1.306
Is it effective to use FGWI at your construction site?	0 0%	2 6.9%	7 24.1%	11 37.9%	9 31%	3.93	0.923
Do you highly recommend the use of FGWI at construction sites?	0 0%	2 6.9%	7 24.1%	8 27.6%	12 41.4%	4.03	0.981
By using FGWI at a construction site, does it enable the project to be completed on time?	1 3.4%	3 10.3%	6 20.7%	11 37.9%	8 27.6%	3.76	1.091

As seen in Table 1, the question, ‘When using FGWI as your mediator, are the site instructions given clearly to the foreign general workers by the FGWI?’, indicated a mean score of 3.03, SD=1.349. A high number of majorities stated *Sometimes* and *Frequently* with 27.6% (8 respondents) respectively. While the question, ‘Do you trust FGWI in delivering construction site instructions to other foreign general workers?’, 9 of 29 respondents (31%) had selected *Sometimes* and *Frequently* respectively, scoring a mean of 3.28, SD=1.306.

Whereas, the question, ‘Is it effective to use FGWI at your construction site?’, had jotted a mean of 3.93, SD=0.923 with a high majority selected *Frequently* (37.9%) and *Always* (31%), respectively. The question in enquiring if construction developers will highly recommend using FGWI at construction sites, a total of 41.4% had selected *Always* indicating a mean score of 4.03, SD=0.981. While, the question, ‘By using FGWI at a construction site, does it enable the project to be completed on time?’, scored a mean of 3.76, SD=1.091 with 37.9% and 27.6% respondents had chosen *Frequently* and *Always*, respectively.

## 7. Conclusion

The language barrier is a communication barrier that has been agitating the stakeholders in the construction industry in Malaysia. The main reason for this is that almost all general workers in the

construction site are foreign labours coming from neighbouring countries. Hence, these workers take time to pick up the local language to communicate with their superiors. However, many of them cannot speak nor understand the local language that is understandable by their superiors. The language barrier consequently leads to other problems such as delay and safety matters. Therefore, construction developers must use the service of a Foreign General Worker Interpreter as a mediator in conveying construction instruction to fellow workers. Thus, making this study significant in understanding the main criteria of Foreign General Worker Interpreter selection.

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