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COMMUNICATION BARRIERS AT THE WORKPLACE: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract:

The success of an organization does not only rely on the rapid growth of their profits. Behind each success of the projects, there is a good relationship and cooperation between all members of the company. To ensure the work goes smoothly, communication is the vital key in achieving it. Without proper communication between the members of the company, the agreement while working cannot be accomplished. Therefore, this study aims to seek the various types of communications at the workplace. At the same time, this study investigates how the communication barriers affect the flow of communication and information at the workplace. A set of questionnaires was developed and distributed to employees in different companies. The questionnaire comprises different sections; demographic profile, the types of communications and the communication barriers. The participants contributed to this survey were in total of 31 respondents. The respondents involved had assessed the survey based on their personal experiences in their respective organizations. The results of the study showed that both verbal and non-verbal communications at the workplace played big roles in ensuring the smooth flow of the company. Other than that, the communication barriers at the workplace existed in which it could affect the growth of the company. Therefore, the findings of this study can help employers to be aware of the challenges and plan on how to overcome it. Recommendations for future research in this area are concluded at the end of this study.

Keywords: workplace, communication, barriers, verbal, non-verbal

1. Introduction

Successful and meaningful communication at the workplace is determined by the ability of parties to understand one another and are able to give appropriate reply. Successful communication is an important thing to be achieved at the workplace (Keyton, 2011).

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Otherwise, the negative impact of not being able to understand each other can occur and thus, the agreement between two parties cannot be achieved. This is called communication barrier. According to Shaw (2011), the greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished. This illusion can trap employees (especially) to being judged by the employers as the people who are not able to follow orders. The barriers of communication can be divided into two categories: environmental and personal (Darr, Longest & Rakich, 2000; Pauley, 2010). Both barriers can block, filter, or distort the message as it is encoded and sent, as well as when it is decoded and received (Hussain, 2013). Among some barriers to communication are; (a) different accent and (b) lack of clarity. Firstly, communication may sometimes fail even when two people speak the same language. However, these two speakers may use different accents (Evans & Suklun, 2017). Next, sometimes people in an organization may experience communication problems because the message sent is not clear to both sender and receive. Failure of communication can often be caused by lack of clarity (Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang, 2014).

In a research conducted to investigate the verbal conflicts between native and non-native English speakers, the result showed that the native speakers had two different views on having non-native English colleagues as employees (Evans & Suklun, 2017). Some of them expressed that they were fine with the employment of the non-native but the rest viewed this matter as difficulties for them especially in communication by highlighting the foreign accent that those workers had resulted in bad communication between them. In another study, the researcher mentioned that the main contributor to communication problem was the different language that one had (Valithern, 2014). In his research conducted at a construction site in Malaysia, he found that the participants viewed different language as something that was always bothering them when communicating. The different in language had caused many works at the construction site to be disrupted.

In any case, there seems to be less researches regarding workplace communication been done in the Malaysian setting. As cited by Jelani and Nordin (2019) in their research, there were not really any distributed works done in the Malaysian setting to look over the similar obstacles (Bhar, Bakar & Chua, 2012). Therefore, this research aims to help identify the different types of communication being used at the workplace and also how the communication barriers affect the communication flow at the workplace. This study is gone to answer the following questions;

- a) What are the types of communication that exist at the workplace?
- b) How do the barriers influence the communication process at the workplace?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Communication is one of the key successes in organizations. The ability to understand each other while working can contribute to better working environment which surely will ensure the good quality of work and good relationship among employers and

employees. But above all, some communication problems are still happening at the workplace. The problems are variously listed. One of it was the language barrier. According to Evans & Suklun (2017), although the native speakers of a language give positive feedback of having to work with the non-native speakers, there is a potential for unintentional and often offensive consequences to occur which might affect the work and relationship of workers and employers. While according to Valitherm (2014) in his study regarding communication barriers at Malaysia's construction sites stated that the language barrier consequently led to other problems such as delay and safety matters. Hence, it should be overcome by better productivity in the construction industry in future.

2.2 Workplace Communication

Workplace communication is known as the exchange of information between one person with another person or group communication in an organization (Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang, 2014). It can include emails, text messages, voicemails, notes and many more. The conflicts happening in verbal communication can cause immediate negative impact between the speaker and the hearer. This can lead to awkwardness while working. Other than that, the communication conflicts through technology such as emails, phone calls and text messages can cause the work to not being carried out correctly (Sims, 2018). They have also mentioned that each company may have different barriers in communication (Rahmat, 2019). The barriers of communication have been divided into two categories which are environmental barriers and personal barriers (Darr, Longest & Rakich, 2000).

2.3 Communication Process at the Workplace

Cheney (2011) asserts that the sender and the receiver are the most common element in any communication exchange. Generally, the sender is the person who conveys ideas, concepts or opinions to others. While the receiver is the one who will receive the message. The message sent by the sender is encoded by using words, gestures or symbols that is suitable with the message context. The message is the outcome of the encoding, which takes the form of verbal, nonverbal, or written language. For the message to be sent, it can be through a channel or a medium. The channel or the medium acts as the carrier of the communication. Communication is the lifeblood of any organization (Rana, 2013). The researcher claims that if the communication breaks down, the organizational performance will be affected. Poor communication at the workplace is believed to be one of the top reasons of why the organization fails. Poor communication or when the communication is neglected, people tend to be cynical and lose their trust and respect towards the organization and the leaders (Rana, 2013).

The term communication theory refers to the body of theories that constitute our understanding of the communication process (Littlejohn, 1983). Theories represent various ways in which observers see their environment, and as Littlejohn claims (1983, p. 12), because theories are abstractions, every theory is partial. Each theory delineates a way of looking and, therefore, its truth value can only be measured in term of how well

it is constructed. This is the reason why there is much disagreement about what constitutes an adequate theory of communication.

2.4 Past Studies on Environmental and Personal Barriers

Environmental barriers are all the things that can cause the organization to not function well. Other than that, the negative things that revolve around the organization can also be the contributors to the barriers. Environmental barriers at the workplace include the competition for attention and time between two sides (sender and receiver). Multiple and simultaneous information exchanged at one time can cause the other side to not understand the message although they may hear the message. In working life, everything needs to be done fast which sometimes caused the employees to not able to get through the thinking process correctly.

Based on a study conducted by Jelani and Nordin (2019), one of the causes to environmental barrier is the acoustic sound or also known as background sound. The examples of background sound are the sound of an air conditioning and also any unexpected sound. The findings of the study indicated that 4.9% of the respondents answered that the sound of an air conditioning disturbed the communication process. While another 2.4% of the respondents agreed that unexpected sounds could be quite bothersome and that they always faced the problem at the workplace.

Page (2017) stated that meritocracy was the only way to reward and appreciate the employees despite their years of service. Many companies nowadays, there are many young leaders and managers. This shows that seniority is not necessarily the determining factor for senior positions. This finding highlights that fear of the power of the administrator and the rule not to question the seniors at workplace are unnecessary.

2.5 Personal Barriers

Personal barriers are the internal beliefs that one has towards the communication. It is based on the culture and values of where the person comes from. Different culture may have different approach towards communication. Therefore, having to work at foreign places or working with foreign employees can sometimes be a problem due to the different cultures that they hold.

In some organizations, there might be foreign employees who are working together with the local employees. Apparently, the trend of having foreign employees is increasing in the recent years (Dewaele & Stavans, 2014). Aneesh (2012) in his research also stated that due to the many travels made by the foreigners in search for job opportunities, intercultural workplaces and social diversities have also increased. Therefore, the different understanding at workplace especially in communication aspect can be varying.

Evans & Suklun (2017) mentioned in their research that some local employees were aware and noted of the presence of the non-local employees working together with them. Some said that having them around was definitely not a problem in conducting work but also admitted that sometimes, difficulties in communicating with those foreign workers were making the work harder. This was due to the different accent, culture and

understanding that exist between them. From the research as well, it should be noted that some workers might have different expectation and perspectives towards workplace communication.

In other research, a study has been carried out by Bergman, Dellve & Skagert (2016) to explore communication processes during workplace meetings in a Swedish healthcare organization. They conducted the mixed method study by involving nine ward managers (seven females and two males) from nine different wards, varying in terms of clinical tasks and location. The result of the study was the communication flow and the organization of the observed meetings varied in terms of physical setting, frequency, time allocated and duration. Overall, the meetings were viewed not only as an opportunity to communicate information top down but also a means by which employees could influence decision-making and development at the workplace.

3. Material and Methods

For this research, the quantitative approach was used in order to answer the research questions. According to Creswell (2014), quantitative research is a structured way of collecting and analyzing data obtained from different sources. A quantitative approach is used for testing objective theories by investigating the relationship between variables. Those variables must be the one that can be measured typically on instruments. Then, the numbered data can be determined using statistical procedures. A variable refers to a characteristic of an individual or an organization that can be measured or observed, which can vary among the participants that are being studied (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, the variables used in this research were the types of workplace communication and the communication barriers that existed at the workplace.

This study was conducted for the working adults. The selection of the participants was random and therefore, all participants came from different type of companies across the country (Winters, Winters, Amedee & Ochsner, 2010). The instrument used in this study is a questionnaire. The questionnaires (17 items) had five parts. In Part A, participants were asked a few questions regarding their personal background. Some of the information needed were the age, gender, races and also the number of years that they had been working in the company. As for Part B and Part C, both parts were asked to the participants regarding the two different types of communication which were verbal and non-verbal communications. Finally, for Part D and Part E, these sections focused on how the barriers of communication influenced the communication process at their workplace. An analysis (table 1) of the instrument revealed a Cronbach alpha of .728, thus showing high reliability of instrument.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.728	17

The result of the findings was analyzed by using the SPSS. Data is presented in the form of mean scores.

4. Findings

This section reports the findings of this study by answering the two research questions presented in the previous section.

4.1 Working Experience

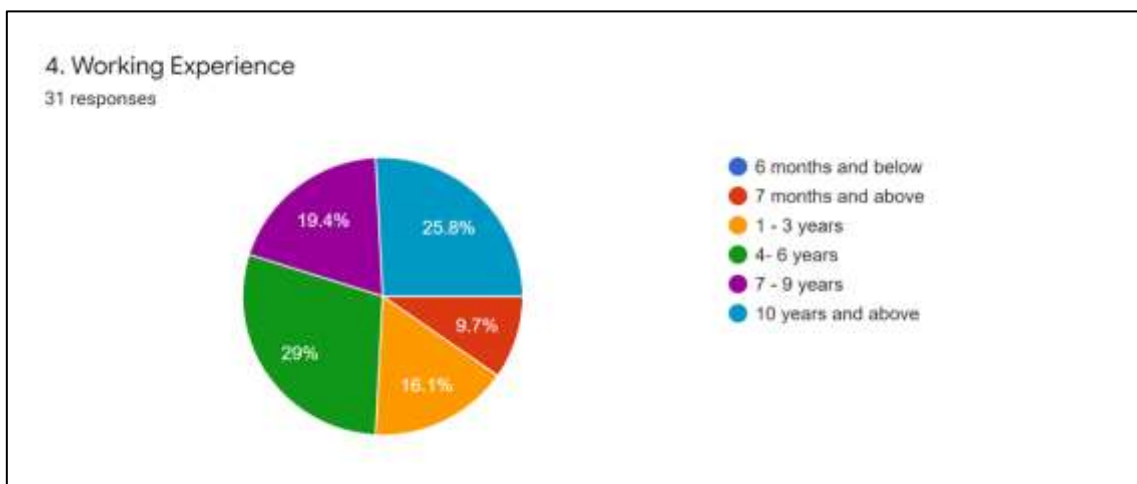


Figure 1: Working Experience

Figure 1 shows the working experience of the respondents. 9 (29%) of the participants were the people who had worked for 4 – 6 years. 8 (25.8%) of them had worked for 10 years and above. About 6 (19.4%) of the participants had worked for 7-9 years. 5 (16%) of the participants had worked for 1-3 years. While 3 (9.7%) of the participants had worked for 7 months and above.

4.2 Findings for Types of Communication

Research Question 1: What are the types of communication that exist at the workplace? The answer to this research question 1 is presented in two sub-sections. This is because at the workplace, communication can be either verbal or non-verbal.

4.3 Findings for Verbal Communication

Figure 2 reveals the mean scores for verbal communication. Highest mean –“use positive and polite words when talking to local and foreign colleagues to ensure harmony” (4.3), “understand reasons why foreign employees prefer to be direct” (3.7), “appreciate directness to show disapproval” (3.5)

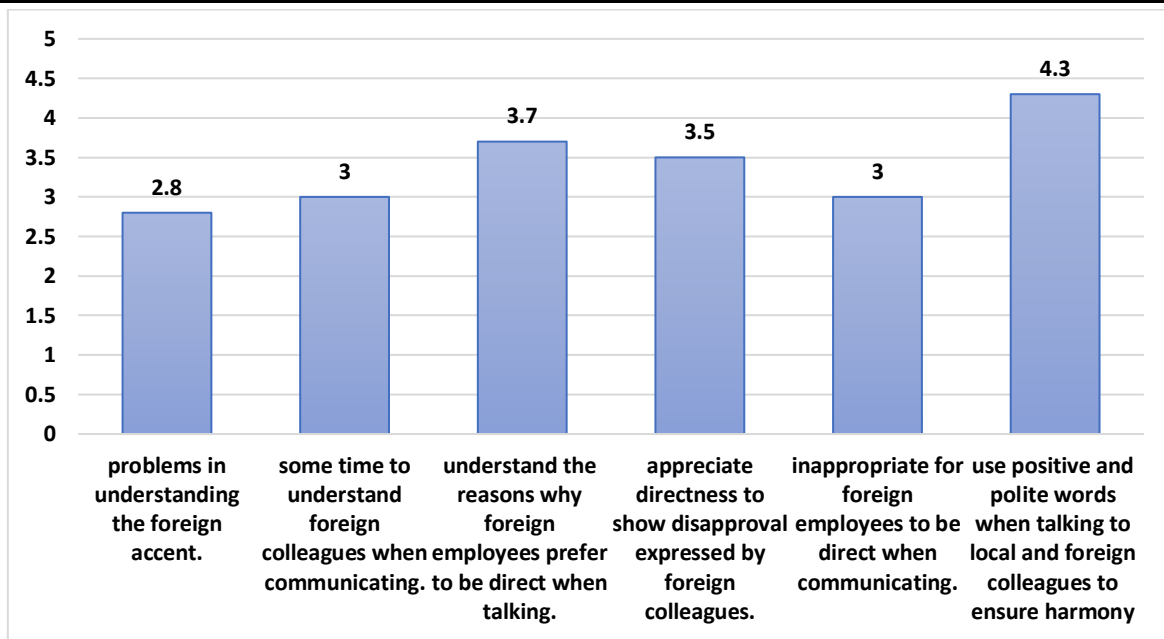


Figure 2: Mean Scores for Verbal Communication

4.4 Findings for Non-Verbal Communication

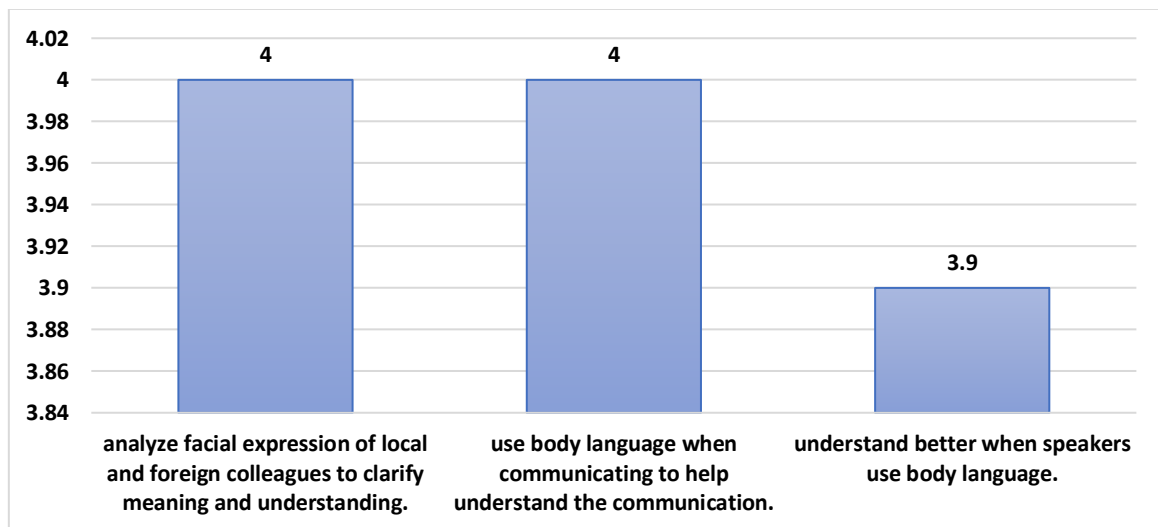


Figure 3: Mean Scores for Non-Verbal Communication

With reference to figure 2, the mean scores for non-verbal communication is revealed. Respondents said that they use “non-verbal- analyze facial expression of local and foreign colleagues to clarify meaning and understand” (4). They also reported to “use body language when communicating” (4). They also “understand better when speakers use better language” (3.9).

4.5 Findings for Communication Barriers

Research Question 2: How do the barriers influence the communication process at the workplace? Two barriers of communication are presented in this study and they are (a) environmental and (b) personal barriers.

4.6 Findings for Environmental Barrier

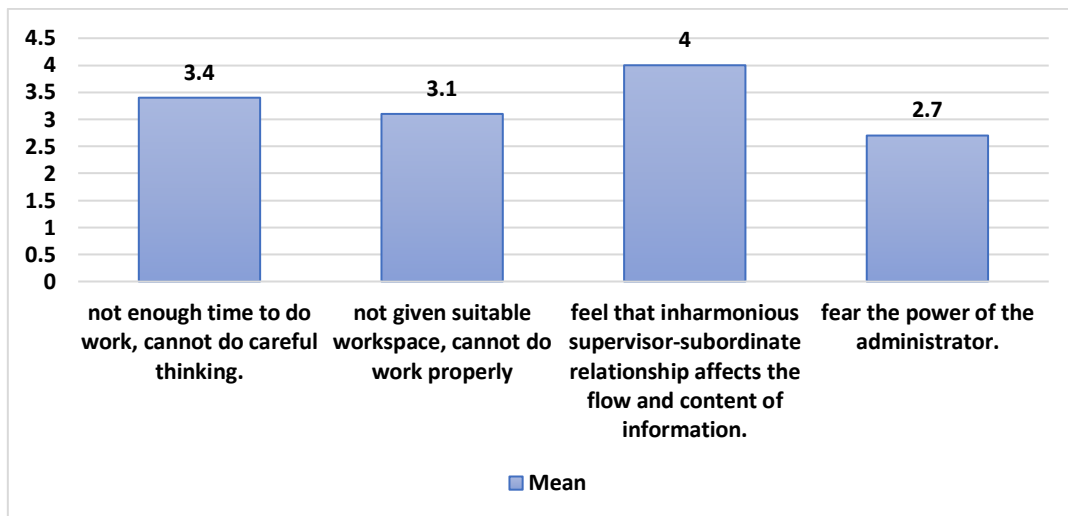


Figure 4: Mean Scores for Environmental Barrier

Figure 4 presents the mean scores for environmental barriers. Participants reported that they “*feel the inharmonious relationship affects flow and content of inform*” (4). Interestingly, the mean score for “*fear the power of admin*” (2.7). This means they did not fear the power of administrators.

4.7 Findings for Personal Barrier

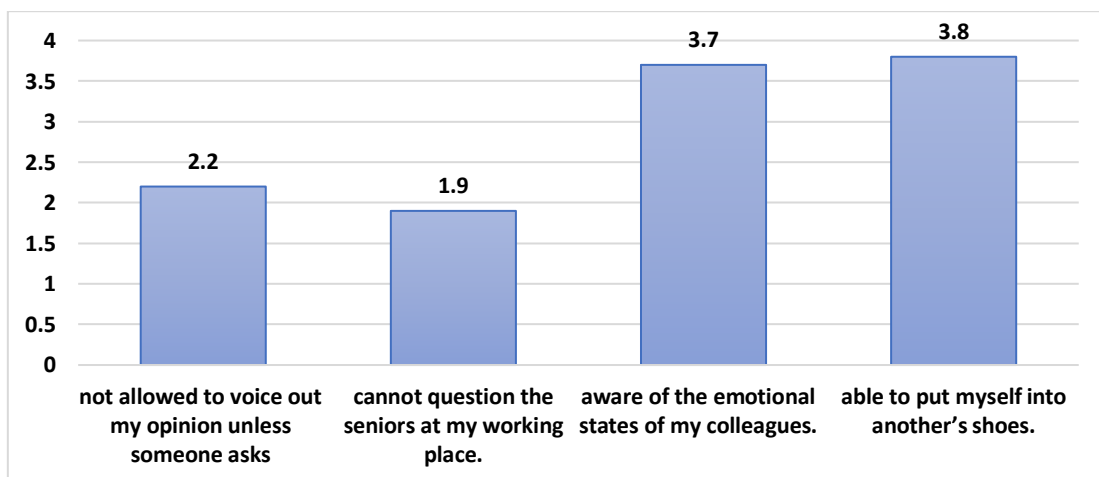


Figure 5: Mean Scores for Personal Barrier

With reference to Figure 5, respondents reported that they were “*able to put into another's shoes*” (3.8). they were also “*aware of emotional states of colleague*” (3.7). Interestingly, the findings reported low mean score for “*cannot question seniors*” (1.9) which means the respondents felt they could question their seniors.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings and Discussion

5.1.1 Verbal Communication

The verbal communications section of the study showed they did not have much problem to understand the foreign accent although they took them some time to understand their foreign colleagues. This was not in accordance with the study conducted by Evans and Suklun (2017). In their study, the researchers found that some of the participants had trouble in understanding the foreign employees even though they had no personal conflicts towards them, and they also took sometimes to understand them. But, according to Sim (2018), due to the diversity of cultures, races and religions, workplace in Malaysia were used to having foreign employees at their workplace. Thus, this answered as to why the respondents chose to stay neutral about the statements. Next, some participants felt neutral about understanding and appreciating the directness shown by their foreign colleagues respectively. While other participants felt neutral when asked whether they thought it was inappropriate for the foreign colleagues to be direct when communicating. This was in accordance with the study conducted by Evans and Suklun (2017) in which they claimed that the native English-speaking women believed that being direct is related to culture. They also reminded themselves that when they encountered this situation, the directness shown by their foreign colleagues was only because it was part of their culture, nothing provocative. In fact, they preferred them to be straightforward as it helped them to deliver their point quickly and efficiently. Besides, by using constructive and polite words while communicating can create a harmonious situation and attain positive reception.

5.1.2 Non-Verbal Communication

The non-verbal communication section of the study showed that participants agreed that they analyzed their colleagues' facial expressions when communicating to clarify meaning and understanding. Next, participants agreed that they used body language when communicating to help understand the communication. Besides, some participants agreed that the use of body language when communicating helped them to understand the communication better. Thus, the message can be delivered and received properly. This result can be supported by the study conducted by Evans and Suklun (2017) who claimed that their foreign colleagues used their personal coping strategies to understand the communication.

5.1.3 Environmental Barrier

The environmental barrier section of the study showed that participants could not perform careful thinking when there was little time given. Few agreed with this statement. According to Adu-Oppong and Agyin-Birikorang (2014), if the sender did not have ample time to think thoroughly, it prevents the sender to think carefully which later caused the sender to improperly structure the message. When this happens, the receiver will also be affected in terms of inability to interpret the message and understand the

meaning. Next, the result indicated that some participants felt neutral about having unsuitable workspace that could affect their work. As stated by Jelani and Nordin (2019), the background sound can be one of the factors of why communication cannot be carried out perfectly. The examples of the background sounds are air conditioning sound and other unexpected sounds. Thus, this study supported the notion that unsuitable workspace could affect work progress. Furthermore, the analysis showed that some of the respondents strongly agreed that inharmonious relationship between supervisor and subordinate can affect the flow of information. This was in accordance with the study conducted by Evans and Suklun (2017) where they claimed that subordinates will not feel motivated to communicate upward in the future if the administrators fail to act accordingly at the workplace. They thought that the communication was not taken seriously. Other than that, some of the participants disagreed that they feared the power of the administrator. This was not in accordance with the study conducted by Evans and Suklun (2017). According to the researchers, fear of the power of the administrator is a common communication barrier at the workplace.

5.1.4 Personal Barrier

The personal barrier section of the study respectively showed that respondents strongly disagreed with the statements *"I believe as an employee, I am not allowed to voice out my opinion unless someone asks me"* and *"I believe I cannot question my seniors at my working place"* respectively. This is in accordance with the study conducted by Page (2017) who claimed that employees in many organizations in Malaysia were given equal chances to share opinions and skills with other members of the company. The researcher also asserted that by encouraging the employees to share their talents and opinions could benefit their business (para. 14). Next, respondents agreed with the statement *"I am aware of the emotional states of my colleagues"* and *"I am able to put myself into another's shoes"* respectively. This is in accordance with the study by Eisenberg (2010) who claimed that lack of empathy was one the biggest hindrances to effective communication (as cited in Adu-Oppong and Agyin-Birikorang, 2014). The researcher also asserted empathy as the ability to put one's self into another's shoes and therefore, empathetic person could see the world through other's eyes.

5.2 Implications

The aim of this study was to find out the types of communication at the workplace and how the communication barriers affect the flow of communication. The findings of this study indicated that verbal and non-verbal communications were the vital communication types at the workplace. Other than that, both types of communication played big roles in ensuring the smoothness of work progress as well as the relationship between employers and employees. Furthermore, with each highlight of the barrier, the management was expected to improve and fix the weaknesses found in their office. This was to motivate all employees to perform their best at work. Other than that, each employee could improve their individual performance. Thus, all works in the company could be done smoothly and the company could grow positively.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

As suggestions for future research, the study should be done in a longer period to further highlight the communication barriers at the workplace. Other than that, future researcher might need to identify whether employers and employees have different perceptions on workplace communication. Besides, future researcher can add more variables for the types of communications and also the barriers affecting the communication flow in order to obtain more comprehensive study. Furthermore, future research can include more companies of different industries to take part in the study. By doing this, communication barriers can be further discovered. Another area for future research would be the ways to improve the barriers to ineffective communication at the workplace.

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