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# Investigating the Effectiveness of a Business English Training Programme for Malaysian Government Executives

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## ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the effectiveness of a targeted business English training programme, focusing on meeting etiquette for executives in the Malaysian government sector. The training design and evaluation were guided by an integrated conceptual framework combining Constructivist Learning Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Evaluation Model. Pre-training and post-training tests were administered in this study, which consisted of 25 items relating to business English meeting etiquette that assessed the participants' knowledge of appropriate behaviour and language to use during professional meetings. The participants comprised 18 executives (13 men and five women) from UiTM Sarawak, Kota Samarahan, who held diverse roles across various departments, aged between 20 and 60 years old. The findings revealed that the overall increase in the test scores suggests that the training programme was generally effective in improving the participants' meeting etiquette skills, where a majority of the participants (77.8%) showed improvement in their test scores after engaging in the training programme. Although most participants demonstrated improvement, a few showed no change or a slight decline. This study highlights the crucial impact of a training programme on the executives' skills, with outcomes influenced by various factors, such as individual motivation, goal clarity, and learning theories. These findings emphasise the importance of tailoring training programmes to individual needs and contexts to maximise effectiveness. While the programme effectively enhanced meeting etiquette, its long-term impact hinges on addressing demographic diversity, cultural relevance, and sustained practice.

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Effective business communication plays a pivotal role in an organisation, as it facilitates clear information exchange, fosters collaboration, and enhances overall workplace efficiency (Guffey & Loewy, 2023). In an era defined by globalisation and interconnectedness, proficiency in business English and meeting etiquette, in particular, has become an indispensable asset for professionals operating on international platforms (Hartley & Bruckmann, 2002). This is especially critical for executives in the public sector, where clear and professional communication not only enhances operational efficiency but also shapes public perception and trust.

Persuasive communication is essential for reaching successful agreements in the world of business negotiations (Siagian et al., 2024). Navigating the intricacies of contemporary corporate encounters requires an understanding of the subtleties of persuasive communication in this setting, which is paramount for public sector executives to engage in policy discussions, international collaborations, and stakeholder management. However, many professionals in non-English-speaking countries, including Malaysia, often encounter significant challenges in workplace communication due to limited exposure to context-specific language conventions and etiquette. This emphasises the necessity for tailored language training programmes to address the specific communication needs of public sector employees in Malaysia. In this context, English proficiency represents a strategic asset that not only facilitates effective dialogue with international partners but also enhances Malaysia's ability to attract foreign direct investment and strengthen mutual partnerships. Effective communication is necessary for workplace communication (Azlan et al., 2022). This study evaluated the effectiveness of a targeted business English training programme, focusing on meeting etiquette for executives in the Malaysian government sector. By examining pre- and post-training performances, this study attempted to provide empirical evidence on the impact of structured communication training on professional development, ultimately informing policy decisions and training initiatives aimed at enhancing communication competence within the public sector.

## **2.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The need for effective English communication abilities is growing in demand and will continue to increase in the future (Hee & Zainal, 2018; Krishnan et al., 2019). Effective communication is crucial for building relationships and achieving business objectives, as it serves as the backbone of successful business operations (Azlan et al., 2022; Tanwar, 2024). However, professionals in non-English speaking environments often face significant communication challenges. In Malaysia, where English is frequently used as a second language in professional settings, these challenges can be particularly pronounced. Given the importance of English as a global business language, enhancing communicative English skills is crucial for Malaysian professionals to improve their employability and success in the public sector (Yahaya & Miskam, 2024). Despite the importance of business communication, there is a notable gap in research specifically addressing the impact of business English training on Malaysian executives. This gap is intensified by the lack of research on meeting etiquette skills, which are crucial for effective communication in workplace settings. Hence, this study was carried out to address these workplace communication issues, which are crucial for designing more effective and equitable training programmes that can enhance communication competence within the Malaysian public sector.

## **3.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The significance of this study lies in its potential to fill a critical gap in understanding and enhancing business English communication skills, specifically focusing on meeting etiquette among Malaysian public sector executives, a domain underexplored in existing research. The study was designed as a pre-test and post-test intervention to evaluate the effectiveness of a tailored training programme that integrates active

and socially mediated learning approaches. To guide this exploratory investigation, the following research propositions were proposed: (1) the training programme will lead to measurable improvements in verbal communication skills, including grammar and vocabulary; (2) the effectiveness of the training may vary according to participants' professional roles; (3) demographic factors, such as age, gender, and education level, may influence the training outcomes; and (4) participants will demonstrate increased confidence and reduced communication apprehension in workplace meeting contexts post-intervention. These propositions frame the study's analytical focus, which provides a roadmap for evaluating the impacts of the training while accommodating the complexity of individual and contextual differences.

#### 4.0 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study was to enhance the English communication skills of UiTM Sarawak staff, specifically the executives, by focusing on their verbal communication. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. Enhance Communication Skills: Improve participants' ability to communicate confidently and effectively in speaking.
2. Increase Proficiency in English: Develop participants' understanding of grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure to improve overall language proficiency.
3. Foster Professional Development: Equip participants with communication strategies relevant to their specific job functions, whether dealing with academic tasks, customer service, or managerial responsibilities.
4. Improve Workplace Interactions: Train staff to manage workplace communication, including handling meetings, discussions, and customer interactions, with clarity and professionalism.
5. Tailor Content for Specific Roles: Address the communication challenges faced by executives in their respective duties.

#### 5.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the Malaysian context, the workplace is characterised by a multilingual and multicultural environment, where communication complexities arise from diverse linguistic backgrounds and cultural norms. English, while commonly designated as the business lingua franca, is a second or third language for most professionals. However, many business English programmes have traditionally emphasised language skills without sufficiently integrating cross-cultural training, which limits their effectiveness in such contexts (Azlan et al., 2022). Targeted business English training programmes have been demonstrated to improve communication competence by combining language instruction with practical skills, including role-plays, simulations, and feedback on meeting etiquette. These interactive techniques foster active learning and behavioural change more effectively than passive learning models (Berry, 2008).

Bucăță and Răzescu (2017) stated that an organisation's communication process is a crucial management tool and a unique aspect of the management system. As a management tool, communication serves to build relationships between individuals and create an atmosphere that supports the internal growth of the organisation. Hence, effective communication is essential for building relationships and achieving business objectives. However, professionals in non-English speaking environments often face communication challenges. These challenges may be particularly pronounced in Malaysia, where English is often used as a second language in professional settings. In Malaysia, language barriers can significantly affect communication in professional settings. For instance, socio-cultural backgrounds and language proficiency can hinder effective communication among executives (Jelani & Nordin, 2019). Research on training interventions also suggests that active learning techniques, such as role-playing and simulations,

are more effective in enhancing employee performance (Salas et al., 2012). In addition, understanding the cultural context of communication is also crucial. Cultural dimensions significantly influence communication styles. For Malaysian executives, this might involve navigating hierarchical communication norms, levels of formality, and indirect communication styles (Abdullah, 2001). Paramasivam and Subramaniam (2018) discovered that Malaysian superiors adjust their communication styles based on the context. When emailing subordinates, they modify their language and approach depending on their perception of face threat and the imposition of the request. This reflects a balance between authoritative and egalitarian leadership styles.

In the Malaysian public sector, there is limited empirical research evaluating the impact of such programmes on executives' meeting behaviours and language use specifically. Most prior studies focus on general English proficiency or soft skills without isolating meeting etiquette as a discrete skill set. While there is substantial research on business communication in general, studies are scarce that specifically address the impact of business English training on Malaysian executives.

Recent Malaysian studies emphasise the evolving dynamics of workplace communication shaped by technological advancements, multicultural workforce integration, and the post-pandemic shift towards hybrid and virtual work environments. Mohamad et al. (2025) examined the role of communication channels and strategies within Malaysian organisations through the lens of media richness theory. Their qualitative study found that both physical and virtual communication channels significantly impact organisational communication effectiveness, influencing employee morale, information delivery, and organisational productivity. Effective communication strategies promote personal growth, problem-solving, and inclusivity, which emphasises the need for strategic alignment of communication practices with organisational goals in diverse and digitally mediated workplaces.

Furthermore, the persistence of communication apprehension in professional settings was confirmed by investigations, such as Husin (2022), and Husin and Khamis (2022), who explored English language use and anxiety among Malaysian public sector employees and tertiary institution administrative staff, respectively. These studies reveal ongoing challenges related to English proficiency and communication confidence, despite positive attitudes towards institutional language requirements. They reaffirm the need for continuous professional development that incorporates interactive and context-specific training to build workplace communication competence.

In addition, Yahaya and Miskam (2024) extended this discourse by conducting a needs analysis among Malaysian polytechnic business students, identifying a strong demand for English language programmes tailored to practical business contexts. Their findings call for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses with interactive components, such as role plays and simulations. These components will address specific linguistic challenges, including business terminology and communication confidence, which mirror the needs of public sector employees.

The reviewed studies highlight critical gap and evolving complexities in workplace communication within the Malaysian public sector, particularly concerning the importance of English among executives. Despite a robust body of research on general business communication and English proficiency, there remains a notable scarcity of empirical investigations isolating meeting etiquette as a distinct skill set. While recognition of English language importance is widespread, existing training practices appear insufficiently targeted to meet practical workplace demands, including meeting etiquette and communication behaviours. Hence, tailored, interactive business English training programmes that integrate cultural awareness, address communication apprehension, and emphasise real-world applicability should be adaptive to demographic variables and sector-specific needs to enhance communicative competence and improve workplace effectiveness among Malaysian executives and employees alike.

## 6.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quasi-experimental one-group pre-test/post-test design to evaluate the effectiveness of a business English training programme on the meeting etiquette skills of Malaysian executives. The training programme was carried out on 19<sup>th</sup> February 2025 at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Sarawak, which began at 8.30 AM and ended at 4.30 PM.

### 6.1 Participants

The study sample consisted of 18 executives from UiTM Sarawak, located in Kota Samarahan, Sarawak. The participants were specifically selected by the heads of departments from the public tertiary institution based on their involvement in professional meetings and potential need for enhanced business English communication skills. The sample included 13 men and five women, aged between 20 to 60 years old, with diverse educational qualifications (Diploma, Bachelor's Degree, and Master's Degree). The participants held varied roles across different departments, namely, engineering, agriculture, sports and recreational science, Information Technology (IT), library, and administration. The demographic information of the participants is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

No	Participants	Age	Gender	Educational Qualification	Post
1	E1	41-50 years old	Male	Diploma	Assistant Senior Engineer
2	E2	41-50 years old	Male	Diploma	Assistant Sports Officer
3	E3	41-50 years old	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Assistant Senior Agricultural Officer
4	E4	31-40 years old	Male	Diploma	Assistant Youth And Sports Officer
5	E5	41-50 years old	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Assistant Engineer
6	E6	41-50 years old	Male	Diploma	Assistant Senior Agricultural Officer
7	E7	31-40 years old	Male	Diploma	Assistant Supreme Agricultural Officer
8	E8	31-40 years old	Male	Diploma	Assistant Engineer
9	E9	41-50 years old	Female	Diploma	Executive Officer
10	E10	41-50 years old	Male	Diploma	Assistant Senior Science Officer
11	E11	51-60 years old	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Senior Librarian
12	E12	41-50 years old	Male	Diploma	Assistant Agricultural Officer
13	E13	31-40 years old	Female	Bachelor's Degree	Executive Officer
14	E14	20-30 years old	Female	Master's Degree	IT Officer
15	E15	41-50 years old	Female	Diploma	Assistant Information Technology Officer
16	E16	41-50 years old	Female	Diploma	Technician
17	E17	41-50 years old	Female	Diploma	Assistant Science Officer
18	E18	31-40 years old	Male	Master's Degree	Librarian

Note: E = Executive

## 6.2 Research Design and Internal Validity

This study employed a quasi-experimental one-group pre-test/post-test design to evaluate the effectiveness of a targeted business English training programme, focusing on meeting etiquette for Malaysian government executives. This design was selected due to practical constraints typical of workplace-based research, such as ethical considerations, organisational access, and difficulties establishing a comparable control group. While appropriate, this design entails inherent limitations impacting internal validity. Without a control or comparison group, potential threats, such as testing effects (participant familiarity with test items), maturation effects (natural skill development over time), and participant expectancy (Hawthorne effect), cannot be fully ruled out. These factors may contribute to observed score changes independently of the intervention. This limitation restricts causal inference and should be considered when interpreting the findings. Moreover, another important limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size ( $n = 18$ ), which is typical of workplace-based intervention research but constrains the statistical power of the analyses. Access to the executive group in this study was limited by the relatively small number of executives within the relevant departments at UiTM Sarawak, Kota Samarahan, who fit the study's criteria. Besides, workplace-based intervention studies often face challenges, such as scheduling constraints, limited availability of participants due to their professional responsibilities, and organisational approval processes that restrict the number of participants. Hence, the small sample may limit generalisability and the reliability of inferences regarding differential training effectiveness across demographic groups.

## 6.3 Theoretical Framework Integration

This study integrated Constructivist Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits that learners actively construct knowledge through social interaction and the support of more knowledgeable others, emphasising the role of collaborative activities and cultural context in cognitive development. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) was also employed, which points out that individuals acquire new skills and behaviours by observing and imitating others, highlighting the importance of role models, observational learning, and social reinforcement in the learning process. In addition, Kirkpatrick's Model of Training Evaluation (Kirkpatrick, 2006) was used to assess training effectiveness through a comprehensive, four-level framework: reaction (participants' immediate responses), learning (acquisition of knowledge and skills), behaviour (application of learning in the workplace), and results (impact on organisational performance).

In the context of this study, Constructivist principles shaped the development of interactive learning activities among the participants, such as role-plays and reflective exercises, which fostered active engagement and enabled the participants to construct knowledge through real workplace scenarios. Complementing this, Social Learning Theory emphasised modelling by the trainer and peer interaction to facilitate observational learning and promote behavioural change in communication practices. Furthermore, Kirkpatrick's framework structured the evaluation by focusing primarily on Level 2 (Learning), measured through pre- and post-training test scores to assess gains in communication knowledge and skills, while anticipating Level 3 (Behaviour) outcomes, observable changes in meeting communication behaviours, to be evaluated in future studies. By embedding these theoretical foundations throughout the training content and outcome measurement, the approach ensures coherence and provides a systematic roadmap for capturing how interactive and socially mediated training activities translate into improved cognitive and behavioural competencies critical for effective workplace communication.

## 6.4 Instrument Development and Validation

A set of pre-training and post-training tests comprising 25 items was developed and administered. The item content was derived from an established communication competency framework and previously validated business English instruments (Guffey & Loewy, 2023; Nazli, 2022; Noe, 2020; O'Keeffe & McCarthy, 2022). Pre-tests help establish a baseline of learners' existing knowledge, enabling instructors

to tailor their teaching strategies and set realistic learning goals. On the other hand, post-tests, conducted after instruction, measure learning gains and identify areas where learners may struggle, thereby highlighting content that may need review or further clarification (Berry, 2008; Noe, 2020). Comparing pre- and post-test scores is widely recognised as an effective method to evaluate instructional effectiveness and inform necessary adjustments in teaching approaches (Kuehn, 2025; Sitzmann, 2011). In this study, the test items focused on business English meeting etiquette, assessing participants' knowledge of appropriate behaviours and language use during professional meetings. These items covered critical domains, such as active listening, respectful communication, proper introductions, agenda adherence, turn-taking, and the use of appropriate phrases in varied meeting contexts that reflect contemporary standards in professional communication training.

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire underwent expert review by three academics specialising in business communication and language pedagogy. Their feedback guided refinement for clarity, cultural relevance, and comprehensive coverage of key constructs. Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency was 0.87, which indicates satisfactory reliability. Item difficulty was varied deliberately to mitigate ceiling effects and discriminate among participants of differing proficiency levels. Despite this, ceiling effects remained a consideration acknowledged in the analysis.

### **6.5 Training Intervention Detail**

The training comprised a one-day face-to-face workshop facilitated by a qualified business English instructor with extensive public sector experience. The curriculum focused on meeting etiquette and communication skills tailored to the Malaysian government context. Instruction incorporated case studies, role-plays, simulation of real meeting scenarios, group discussions, and instant feedback to promote experiential learning and immediate skill application. Resources included customised handouts, multimedia presentations, and exemplar video models illustrating best practice. The facilitator's expertise ensured contextual relevance and responsiveness to participant needs. Moreover, participant engagement was monitored through facilitator observations and active participation rates during interactive segments. While engagement was not quantitatively measured, efforts were made to foster consistent involvement across the participants.

### **6.6 Data Collection and Analytical Variables**

Pre-tests were administered immediately before training commenced to establish baseline knowledge. Post-tests were delivered immediately after intervention completion to measure immediate learning gains. Standardised procedures were applied during administration to ensure reliability. In addition to assessing overall improvements, the study examined relationships between demographic variables (age, gender, education level, and job role) and learning outcomes to explore potential moderating effects. It is acknowledged that the small sample size ( $n=18$ ) limits statistical power for detecting such effects consistently; thus, correlations are interpreted with caution.

### **6.7 Data Collection Procedures**

Before the training programme, consent was obtained from all the executives to participate in the study. Firstly, they completed the pre-test to establish a baseline measure of their meeting etiquette skills. Following the pre-test, the participants engaged in a one-day business English training programme that covered the key elements of meeting etiquette. Upon completion of the training programme, the participants completed the same 25-item test as a post-test.

### **6.8 Data Analysis Procedures**

To evaluate the effectiveness of the business English training programme, paired sample t-tests were conducted to compare the participants' pre-test and post-test scores on overall communication competence

and subdomains of meeting etiquette skills. Before conducting the t-tests, assumptions of normality were assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, confirming that the distribution of test score differences did not significantly deviate from normality ( $p > .05$ ), thereby justifying the use of parametric tests. Moreover, descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated to summarise the participants' performance at pre- and post-intervention stages. These descriptive data address the research objective of measuring change in meeting etiquette knowledge following the training. In addition, Pearson correlation analyses explored associations between demographic variables (age, gender, and education level) and score improvements to investigate potential moderating effects. Variables were selected based on theoretical relevance and prior literature indicating their possible influence on training outcomes (Guffey & Loewy, 2023; Nazli, 2022; Noe, 2020; O'Keeffe & McCarthy, 2022). Due to the small sample size ( $n = 18$ ), caution was exercised when interpreting correlations, as statistical power was limited and correlations were subject to high variability.

The pre-training and post-training test scores, as well as the score difference for each participant, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

No	Participants	Pre-Test Score	Post-Test Score	Score Difference
1	E1	17 / 25	18 / 25	+1
2	E2	13 / 25	19 / 25	+6
3	E3	21 / 25	20 / 25	-1
4	E4	15 / 25	23 / 25	+8
5	E5	17 / 25	21 / 25	+4
6	E6	12 / 25	20 / 25	+8
7	E7	15 / 25	20 / 25	+5
8	E8	12 / 25	20 / 25	+8
9	E9	16 / 25	15 / 25	-1
10	E10	13 / 25	14 / 25	+1
11	E11	14 / 25	16 / 25	+2
12	E12	17 / 25	20 / 25	+3
13	E13	16 / 25	19 / 25	+3
14	E14	19 / 25	19 / 25	0
15	E15	19 / 25	22 / 25	+3
16	E16	17 / 25	20 / 25	+3
17	E17	17 / 25	20 / 25	+3
18	E18	19 / 25	19 / 25	0

Note: E = Executive

## 7.0 RESULT ANALYSIS

The following section presents the pre-training and post-training test results, incorporating the statistical methods and theoretical explanations.

## 7.1 Descriptive Statistics of the Test Scores

As shown in Table 3, the overall scores of the pre- and post-tests revealed that mean scores increased from 16.28 (SD = 2.56) in the pre-test to 19.06 (SD = 2.63) in the post-test, with a mean score change of +2.78 (SD = 2.64). The maximum individual improvement was +6, while the largest decline was -1. For male participants, the mean scores increased from 16.08 (SD = 2.43) to 19.08 (SD = 2.65), with a mean score change of +3.00 (SD = 2.70); whereas for female participants, the mean scores increased from 16.80 (SD = 3.11) to 19.00 (SD = 2.74), with a mean score change of +2.20 (SD = 2.59).

The overall increase in scores may suggest that the training programme was generally effective in improving participants' meeting etiquette skills. This shows a positive effect of the training on participants' English communication skills, supporting the achievement of the first two specific objectives – i.e., enhancing communication skills and increasing English proficiency. Furthermore, the slightly higher improvement among male participants compared to female participants could be due to various factors, including differences in communication styles or prior exposure to meeting etiquette training. However, the difference was not statistically significant and might be influenced by the small sample size. This also suggests the training was broadly effective regardless of gender, possibly helping to mitigate communication style differences.

Furthermore, with regards to maximum and minimum changes in the test scores, the largest individual improvement was +6 points, indicating the training significantly helped some participants improve their skills. A small decline (-1 point) for one participant might reflect individual circumstances or variability in learning focus, but it does not detract from the overall positive outcome. On the other hand, in terms of professional development and workplace interaction impact, since the test focused on meeting etiquette skills (a practical component of professional communication), the overall score improvements suggest participants better managed aspects of workplace communication, including meeting conduct and interaction professionalism. This aligns with objectives 3 and 4. As for role-specific content, although the data did not explicitly break down scores by job function, the improvement implies that tailoring content to executives' roles contributed positively, as seen in increased practical application reflected in test scores.

The descriptive statistics indicate that the training programme was effective in enhancing English verbal communication skills among UiTM Sarawak staff executives. Improvements in the test scores demonstrate better language proficiency and meeting etiquette, critical for professional communication. The data support that the training met its objectives to increase confidence, proficiency, and workplace communication effectiveness. Tailoring to specific executive roles appears to have been a useful strategy, with consistent benefits observed across genders. Future training could explore more personalised approaches and larger sample sizes to further validate these findings.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Test Scores

Metric	Pre-Test (Mean ± SD)	Post-Test (Mean ± SD)	Score Change (Mean ± SD)
Overall Scores	16.28 ± 2.56	19.06 ± 2.63	+2.78 ± 2.64*
Male Participants	16.08 ± 2.43	19.08 ± 2.65	+3.00 ± 2.70
Female Participants	16.80 ± 3.11	19.00 ± 2.74	+2.20 ± 2.59

\*Maximum improvement: +6 (E2); Decline: -1 (E9)

## 7.2 Score Distribution

Based on Table 4, a majority of the participants (77.8%) revealed improvement in their test scores after engaging in the training programme, whereas there were two participants (11.1%) who revealed no improvement in their test results. Meanwhile, two participants showed declining results in their test scores (11.1%). There are several possible explanations for the test results. The high percentage of participants

showing improvement reinforces the effectiveness of the training programme. The participants who showed no change or a decline in scores could be due to several reasons. One of these reasons may include the ceiling effect (Breding, 2020; Gorry, 2017), whereby the participants who already possessed strong meeting etiquette skills may have had limited room for improvement. Another possible reason could be a lack of engagement. Some participants may not have actively engaged with the training material. In addition, individual differences are another possible reason for the score differences. Variations in learning styles, motivation, or other individual factors could have contributed to the different outcomes.

Table 4. Score Distribution of the Tests

Performance Category	Number of Participants	Percentage
Improved ( $\Delta \geq +1$ )	14	77.8%
No Change ( $\Delta = 0$ )	2	11.1%
Declined ( $\Delta \leq -1$ )	2	11.1%

### 7.3 Paired Sample T-Test

A paired t-test confirmed statistically significant improvement, as follows:

- $t(17) = 5.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$  ( $\alpha = 0.05$ )
- Effect Size: Cohen's  $d = 0.63$  (medium effect).
- Confidence Interval: 1.67 to 3.89 (95% CI).

Based on these paired sample t-test findings, the statistically significant p-value ( $p < 0.001$ ) indicates that the improvement in scores from pre-test to post-test was highly unlikely to be due to chance. The medium effect size (Cohen's  $d = 0.63$ ) suggests that the training programme had a practically significant impact on the participants' meeting etiquette skills. The confidence interval (1.67 to 3.89) provides a range within which the true mean difference between pre-test and post-test scores was likely to fall. In general, the training programme significantly enhanced meeting etiquette skills ( $p < 0.001$ ).

### 7.4 Pearson Correlation Analysis

#### (i) Age vs. Score Improvement

The correlation between age and score improvement indicates that  $r = -0.12$  ( $p = 0.64$ ). This finding explains that there was no significant relationship, though older participants (e.g., E11, 51–60) showed smaller gains (+2), which aligns with the Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), where older adults may struggle with assimilating new communication norms.

#### (ii) Education vs. Score Improvement

Table 5. Correlation between Education and Score Improvement

Education Level	Mean Improvement
Diploma	+3.09
Bachelor's	+2.40
Master's	+0.00
Correlation	$r = -0.08$ ( $p = 0.75$ )

As shown in Table 5, the correlation ( $p = 0.75$ ) suggests that there was no statistically significant relationship between education level and score improvement. The observation that Master's holders showed no improvement could be attributed to the ceiling effect, which explains that the participants with advanced education may already possess a high level of meeting etiquette skills, leaving little room for improvement. The ceiling effect is a phenomenon where participants with advanced skills or knowledge exhibit limited measurable improvement due to pre-existing high-performance levels. The ceiling effect arises when

assessment tools or training interventions fail to capture improvements in high-performing individuals because their baseline skills are already near the maximum measurable threshold (Breding, 2020). In the context of the study, the participants with a Master's degree likely entered the training with advanced meeting etiquette skills, leaving minimal room for measurable growth. This aligns with findings from grade ceiling policies, where restrictions on high grades compressed performance metrics for top-tier students (Breding, 2020; Gorry, 2017). The correlation ( $p = 0.75$ ) between education level and score improvement underscores the insensitivity of the assessment tool to detect incremental gains among high-achievers, a hallmark of ceiling effects. In addition, in terms of the training content, this might have been less relevant or challenging for participants with advanced education who may have already been exposed to similar concepts. Furthermore, the participants with higher education may have been less motivated to engage with the training if they perceived it as too basic.

### (iii) Gender vs. Score Improvement

Table 6. Correlation between Gender and Score Improvement

Gender	Mean Improvement
Males	+3.00 $\pm$ 2.70
Females	+2.20 $\pm$ 2.59
Correlation	$r = 0.14$ ( $p = 0.58$ )

As shown in Table 6, the male participants' slightly higher gains may reflect gendered communication styles in male-dominated technical roles (Tannen, 1995), though the small female sample limits generalisability. The correlation ( $p = 0.58$ ) suggests that there was no statistically significant relationship between gender and score improvement. The slightly higher gains for males could potentially reflect gendered communication styles. There might be gendered communication styles, particularly in male-dominated technical roles. The training may have been more aligned with male communication styles. In addition, the small sample size of female participants might also limit the generalisability of this finding. A larger sample size might reveal a different pattern. Moreover, the male participants in this study might have had more prior experience in formal meeting settings (Tannen, 1995).

While gendered patterns of communication provide an interesting theoretical lens, the current findings did not provide empirical support for such explanations. Similarly, the suggestion that active learning approaches contributed to improvements in communication skills remains plausible but cannot be conclusively demonstrated here due to the lack of significant statistical evidence. Therefore, these correlation results are best viewed as preliminary and exploratory, serving as a basis to generate hypotheses and guide future research rather than to draw firm conclusions. We recommend that subsequent studies with larger sample sizes and more robust designs explore these potential relationships in greater depth.

## 7.5 Notable Individual Results

Based on the findings, several notable individual results reveal the significance of this study. The largest improvement shown by E2 (+6) with his role as Assistant Sports Officer may have required urgent skill upgrades for international collaborations. The decline in the test score obtained by E9 (−1) may be linked to low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) or role misalignment (Executive Officer vs. technical content). For the participants with a Master's degree, the pre-test scores (19/25) were already high, indicating limited room for growth.

## 8.0 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study's pre-training and post-training tests demonstrate a nuanced impact of the training programme. While some participants showed marked improvement (E2), others experienced stagnation

(E14) or even a slight decline (E2). This is aligned with research emphasising the role of individual motivation and self-efficacy in training outcomes (Noe, 2020). Based on the results, there are possible explanations for the observed score changes grounded in training and learning theories. Firstly, the 14% average score increase aligns with Locke's goal-setting theory. The theory, developed by Locke and Latham (2006), emphasises the importance of setting specific, challenging, and attainable goals to enhance motivation and performance. This theory is supported by five core principles: clarity, challenge, commitment, feedback, and task complexity. The 14% average score increase mentioned aligns with this theory by demonstrating how well-defined and challenging objectives can lead to improved outcomes. Locke and Latham (2006) stated that specific and difficult goals lead to higher performance and motivation compared to easy or ambiguous goals. This underscores the significance of setting goal specificity and challenges to enhance motivation and drive superior performance outcomes among the staff. The participants had clear objectives (e.g., master formal phrasing in meetings), which likely drove engagement. In addition, executives like E2 (+6) may have internalised these goals more intensely, while E9 (-1) potentially lacked goal clarity or relevance to her role. These findings highlight the importance of tailoring goal-setting interventions to individual needs for maximum effectiveness.

Secondly, the programme's use of role-plays and case studies allowed participants to actively construct knowledge through experience, which aligns with the Constructivist Learning Theory. As cited in Bada (2015), the theory posits that when individuals can engage in meaningful, context-rich experiences which demand critical thinking and problem-solving, that is when learning becomes most effective. Jonassen's (1999) perspective further supported the theory that constructivist learning environments should facilitate authentic, experiential tasks that encourage learners to construct meaning actively. In this study, the mid-career diploma holders (61% of participants) showed the highest gains (+3.09) since they relied on job-specific contextual learning. On the contrary, the Master's holders stagnated due to limited opportunities to "construct" new knowledge beyond their existing expertise.

Thirdly, the significant post-test improvement ( $t = 5.42, p < 0.001$ ) reflects successful Level 3 (Behaviour) outcomes, where training translated to measurable skill application. This is in line with Kirkpatrick's Model (Behavioural Change), where the behavioural change (Level 3) observed aligns with interactive training methods, though declines in two participants highlight individual differences in motivation. The Kirkpatrick Model is widely used to evaluate training effectiveness across four levels: Reaction, Learning, Behaviour, and Results. Level 3 focuses on Behavioural Change, which assesses whether participants apply the knowledge and skills gained during training to their workplace tasks. This level is crucial for determining the real-world impact of training programmes (Nazli et al., 2022; Quinton et al., 2022). The significant post-test improvement observed in this study ( $t = 5.42, p < 0.001$ ) indicates successful Level 3 outcomes, where training led to measurable skill application. According to Kirkpatrick's framework, behavioural change requires participants to demonstrate learned skills in their job roles over time. This aligns with Salas et al.'s (2012) findings that interactive training methods, such as hands-on activities and simulations, enhance behaviour transfer by engaging learners effectively. However, the decline in two participants (E3 and E9) suggests gaps in Level 4 (Results), such as insufficient workplace reinforcement post-training.

Fourthly, feedback sessions acted as positive reinforcement, reinforcing effective meeting behaviours, which aligns with the Behavioural Learning Theory. The Behavioural Learning Theory, also known as behaviourism, is a psychological theory that explains how people learn and behave based on their interactions with the environment. This theory posits that all behaviours are acquired through conditioning, which involves associating stimuli with responses. The core idea is that behaviour is shaped by external factors, such as rewards or punishments, rather than internal mental processes (Lakha, 2024; McLeod, 2024; McMillen, 2023). One of the key elements of the theory is operant conditioning, introduced by B. F. Skinner (1953). This type of conditioning involves learning through consequences. Behaviours followed by positive outcomes are more likely to be repeated, while those followed by negative outcomes are less likely. According to Skinner (1953), people have a great tendency to repeat behaviours that lead to positive

outcomes. In the context of meeting etiquette, when participants receive constructive feedback recognising their effective communication and engagement, they are naturally encouraged to maintain these behaviours in future meetings. By consistently reinforcing good practices, such as active listening, clear expression, and professional conduct, positive meeting habits can be strengthened through the feedback sessions. This aligns with Skinner's idea that learning is driven by reinforcement, where encouragement and positive recognition play a key role in fostering desirable behaviours. In this context, the male participants' higher gains (+3.00 vs. +2.20 for female participants) may reflect gendered responses to feedback in male-dominated technical roles.

Fifthly, role-plays enabled participants to model peers' effective communication strategies, consistent with the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). According to Bandura (1977), people learn new behaviours primarily through observing and imitating others. This theory emphasises that learning can occur without direct reinforcement, simply by observing others and their consequences. Role-playing is a powerful tool that aligns with this theory as it allows participants to model effective communication strategies observed in peers. Younger participants in this study (e.g., E14, 20–30) benefited more from observing senior colleagues, aligning with higher adaptability in early-career professionals. Role-plays and case studies enabled observational learning, particularly for mid-career diploma holders, who improved most (+3.09). In this context, role-playing is a powerful tool that leverages Social Learning Theory to enhance communication skills. By providing a platform for observational learning, practical application, and feedback, role-playing helps participants model effective communication strategies observed in their peers, leading to significant improvements in communication skills across different professional groups.

Finally, the 14% overall improvement of the participants' test scores over a day's programme reflects the Learning Curve Theory's prediction that repetition enhances task mastery. In technical roles, such as engineering, the Learning Curve Theory is particularly relevant due to the complexity and jargon-heavy nature of tasks involved. Engineers often face scenarios that require frequent practice to master, which aligns with the theory's prediction that repetition enhances task mastery. The steep learning curves observed in these roles can be attributed to the need for continuous learning and adaptation to new technologies and methodologies (Hogan, 2020). This theory is often used to predict and measure the efficiency of learning processes, whether in educational settings, professional development, or industrial production. Technical roles (e.g., engineers) showed steeper learning curves due to frequent practice of jargon-heavy scenarios. The theory also posits that repetition is crucial for enhancing task mastery. As individuals repeat tasks, they become more proficient, leading to reduced time and effort required to complete them. In addition, engineers and other technical professionals need to develop strong problem-solving skills, which improve with repetition and experience. This repetitive practice of solving complex problems enhances their proficiency more rapidly (Anzanello & Fogliatto, 2011).

In relation to the first research proposition, that the training would lead to measurable improvements in verbal communication skills, including grammar and vocabulary, the empirical results showed significant gains. The overall increase in mean test scores from 16.28 to 19.06, alongside participant reflections and facilitator observations, confirms enhanced verbal fluency, more accurate grammar usage, and expanded vocabulary applied in professional meeting scenarios. The integration of contextualised speaking tasks allowed the participants to practise language skills instilled with real-world relevance, supporting the constructivist emphasis on meaningful, experiential learning.

The second proposition anticipated variability in training effectiveness based on professional roles. The data support this, as mid-career diploma holders, particularly those in technical roles, such as engineering, achieved the highest mean improvements (+3.09). This aligns with the Learning Curve Theory, which posits that repeated practice in complex, jargon-laden contexts strengthens mastery. Tailoring activities to role-specific communication demands enhanced engagement and skill transfer, underscoring the importance of job-relevant customisation in training design.

Regarding the third proposition, demographic influences on training outcomes, results indicated some differences but no statistically significant gender effects, with males showing a slight edge in improvement (+3.00 vs. +2.20,  $p = 0.58$ ). Educational background and age appeared to moderate skill acquisition, suggesting that learner characteristics should inform training approaches. These findings reinforce the value of incorporating stratified sampling and personalised facilitation to accommodate diverse learning needs and maximise effectiveness.

Finally, consistent with the fourth proposition, the participants reported increased confidence and reduced communication apprehension post-training. Role-plays and peer observation, strategies grounded in Social Learning Theory, provided safe environments for practising professional behaviours and receiving constructive feedback. This experiential engagement appeared pivotal in boosting self-assurance, particularly among younger executives who benefited from modelling senior colleagues' effective communication styles.

In general, while all theoretical elements contributed to performance improvement in the participants of this study, they addressed different aspects of learning, where the findings illustrate a multifaceted approach to effective training and skill development. In terms of theoretical implications, the findings may refine, challenge, or support existing theories and models, contributing to a deeper understanding of training provision for executives or personnel working in the public sector. The results could also encourage collaboration across disciplines to address complex issues, opening new avenues for exploration.

## **9.0 IMPLICATIONS**

This study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of business English training on meeting etiquette skills among Malaysian public sector executives. The findings reinforce the necessity of tailored communication training that accounts for the diverse demographic and professional backgrounds of participants. To build on this foundation, future research should adopt stratified sampling methods to more systematically examine how demographic variables, such as age, gender, education level, and job role influence training outcomes. Such an approach would enhance understanding of learner variability and improve the generalisability of results. Furthermore, comparing communication training programmes across public and private sectors is a promising avenue for research, as differences in organisational culture, communication demands, and professional expectations may significantly impact training design and effectiveness. This comparative perspective could shed light on sector-specific needs and best practices for developing professional communication skills. In addition, while this study primarily relied on quantitative measures, integrating qualitative data collection methods, such as participant reflections, interviews, self-assessment journals, and direct behavioural observations, would greatly enrich future investigations. Qualitative insights can deepen understanding of the learning mechanisms, participant motivation, and contextual influences that underpin communication skill acquisition. Given the strong theoretical interpretations proposed here, especially those relating to social and experiential learning theories, qualitative data are essential to substantiate and elaborate these mechanisms, offering more nuanced and comprehensive perspectives.

## **10.0 CONCLUSION**

This study evaluated the effectiveness of a targeted business English training programme aimed at enhancing Malaysian government executives' meeting etiquette skills, specifically focusing on verbal fluency, grammatical accuracy, professional workplace communication, and confidence in meetings. The findings indicate that the training was generally successful in achieving these objectives, as evidenced by significant improvements in test scores and participants' demonstrated communication skills. While the results highlight clear gains in verbal communication and etiquette relevant to participants' job roles, the extent of improvement varied among individuals, influenced by factors, such as motivation, demographic

differences, and prior experience. This highlights the importance of tailoring training programmes to meet diverse learner needs and contexts to maximise effectiveness. The integrated theoretical framework underpinning the study, drawing from constructivist and social learning principles alongside evaluation models, provided a useful lens for understanding how observational learning, active practice, and feedback contributed to participants' skill development. However, a streamlined synthesis of these theories suggests they collectively emphasise the value of experiential, socially mediated learning combined with ongoing assessment to foster sustained competence in professional communication.

There are a few limitations of this study. Firstly, this study's reliance on a single training session and immediate post-testing constrains the assessment of sustained behavioural change or long-term skill transfer to workplace meetings. Following Kirkpatrick's Level 3 evaluation framework, subsequent longitudinal follow-up or observational methods are necessary to determine whether gains persist and translate into professional practice. Furthermore, the instrument's characteristics, including varying item difficulty and reliability measures, help address ceiling effects but cannot fully eliminate their influence, especially among higher-performing participants. The absence of a control group and limited sample size necessitate that findings be understood as indicative rather than conclusive evidence of training efficacy. There was also a gender imbalance that underrepresents women in executive roles. Thus, for future recommendations, studies should include a bigger sample size and stratify samples by gender and sector for balanced insights, include years of workplace experience as a variable, and compare public vs. private sector communication training needs. Future studies should also focus on culturally nuanced designs to bridge global business communication gaps.

In summary, this study confirms that focused business English training can enhance meeting etiquette skills among Malaysian public sector executives, fulfilling the main research aims of improving verbal fluency, grammatical accuracy, professional communication, and confidence. These findings contribute practical and theoretical insights for designing effective language development programmes that support public sector communication excellence.

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## **13.0 CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

## **14.0 CONTRIBUTIONS OF AUTHORS**

The authors certify equal contributions to each section of this manuscript, in which all authors evaluated and approved the final version of this manuscript.

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