

The Language Problem Issue among Foreign Workers in the Malaysian Construction Industry

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Abstract

The language problem issue among foreign workers is not a new issue in the construction industry. In fact, this issue is said to be contributing to the occurrence of accidents. Interviews conducted with five contractors (A, B, C, D, E) proved that language problem, both verbally and written, exists among non-Indonesian foreign workers, especially those who have just arrived and work in the construction industry in Malaysia. Therefore, this paper is to discuss the result of the interview with the contractors regarding language problem issue that occur in the construction industry in Malaysia.

Key words: language problem, foreign worker, construction industry, Malaysia

1. Introduction

The language problem issue among foreign workers is not a new issue in the construction industry in Malaysia. Influx of foreigners into the country since the end of 1980ies, is seen to be opening many opportunities for them to be the work force in various sectors including as workers or construction labourers. This scenario of foreign workers influx into various sectors, including the construction sectors, has created a variation in language. This language is often linked to communication, where according to Trajkovski and Loosemore (2006), language is the barrier for communication, whether verbal or written, when presenting information to the foreign workers. This made presentation of work order by the employer difficult as the workers do not understand it.

2. The Language Problem Issue

The language problem issue actually has existed for a long time in various sectors in the whole country. The economics' rapidity in a country will attract the interest of foreign workers to work in the countries that needed work force. Like the construction industry, the need for foreign labour force is important to fulfil the requests of employer who needed the foreign workers to carry out construction works due to the lack of local work force. Even though the presence of foreign workers helped raise the country's economy positively, the language issues that occur among foreign workers also contributed towards other problems.

In Australia, Loosemore and Andonakis (2007) explained that the existing language problem among foreign workers, where it affects any activity that involved compliance with work safety and health. The result of Loosemore and Andonakis' survey showed that about 13.9% of the respondent said that language is the barrier to effective implementation of work safety and health in the construction industry.

Trajkovski and Loosemore's research (2006) in the construction industry in Australia revealed that the language factor have contributed towards the high accidents rate to 85.7% of the foreign workers as they use a language other than English at the work place. Trajkovski and Loosemore's research also proved that 48.7% of the foreign workers are unable to understand the instruction that was presented because of the lack of understanding for the English language whereby 66.7% of the foreign workers make mistakes in their work as they do not understand the orders.

In Singapore, Wah (2000) explains that critical language problem in the country also contributes towards accidents that occurs at construction side whereby most foreign workers who hail from Bangladesh, India and Thailand do not understand the orders presented because they do not understand English or Mandarin.

In the UK, research conducted by Bust et al. (2008) also revealed that the language problem exists among foreign workers in the construction industry, including the research that was conducted in the US by O'Connor et al. (2005) regarding young Latin construction workers facing high injury risks because they have had less training on safety and health as they were less able to communicate in English.

3. The Language Problem Issue in Malaysia

In Malaysia, following the phenomenon of influx of foreign workers into the country since the 1980ies has caused the language problem issue especially in the construction industry that has caused accidents risks. This statement is emphasised through research that was carried out by Haryati (2009) where according to the respondents' perception, 50% of the contractors agreed and 41% of them agreed strongly that the existence of communication problem (language) amongst foreign workers in the construction industry had contributed towards the accident risks at construction site.

The result of the interviews conducted with five contractors (A, B, C, D, E) in Malaysia proved that the language problem existed, both verbally and written, amongst non-Indonesian foreign workers in the construction industry. The number of foreign workers according to their nationality, who came to work in the construction industry in Malaysia is shown in table 1.

As we are well aware, most Indonesian foreign workers do not experience significant language problems as most of them understand the Malay language used by residence in Malaysia. Interviews conducted found that all five contractors interviewed stated that non-Indonesian workers, especially the newly arrived who work in the construction industry do not really understand the Malay and English language where the effect of this problem is stated by contractor A, B, and C, that is, it hinders safety implementation amongst non-Indonesian foreign workers. Whereas, contractor A, B, D, and E, simultaneously stated that this language problem could hinder and delay implementation of construction activities amongst non-Indonesian foreign workers.

Following the language problem that occurs among these non-Indonesian foreign workers, the interviews that were conducted found that all five contractors stated that language problem amongst non-Indonesian foreign workers is among the contributing factors for accidents in the construction industry in Malaysia. Contractors A, B and C emphasised that accidents caused by this language problem originates from the difficulty to understand work order, safety rules and difficulty in interpreting safety warning signs at construction sites. Contractor D also stated that accidents caused by this language problem only arises from the difficulty in understanding the work order and safety rules. Whereas, contractor E stated that difficulties to understand the safety rules and difficulties in interpreting the safety warning signs at the construction site are among the source of accidents that occurs caused by this language problem.

Therefore, to overcome this language problem that occurs amongst non-Indonesian foreign workers in the construction industry in Malaysia, contractor A suggested that these foreign workers be given basic Malay language training provided by their employers so that every work order and aspects of safety is understood. Contractor B suggested that parties involved need to ensure that entrance of these foreign workers consist of workers that can read Malay or English language so that every work order is easily understood. To overcome this language problem among non-Indonesian foreign workers, contractor C also suggested that employers could conduct language courses for foreign workers and at the same time ensure that foreign workers admitted to work in Malaysia can use and understand the Malay or English language.

On the contrary, contractor D suggested that foreign workers who do not understand the Malay or English language is sent home to their respective country because of their inability to understand work order and only those who understand Malay or English language be allowed to work in Malaysia. Finally, contractor E suggested that employers conducts language courses and training related to safety aspects including understanding the safety warning signs before starting work at the construction site.

4. Summary

On the whole, the language problem issue, both verbal and written, occur among non-Indonesian foreign workers especially those newly arrive to work in the construction industry in Malaysia. On the contrary, this issue is among the factors that contributes to accidents happening in the construction industry in Malaysia because foreign workers found it difficult to understand work orders, safety rules and interpreting safety warning signs. In fact, this language problem issue cannot be taken lightly by concerned parties in the construction industry as this existing language problem can contribute towards accidents that occur to foreign workers. Accidents that happened, for sure, caused part of the construction productivities to drop as a result of insufficient workers. Injured, disabled or death of workers at work will definitely be a loss to all parties involved in the construction activities that involved insurance cost, the cost to replace workers, cost on delayed works and others.

Nationality	Construction Sector
Indonesia	151,333
Nepal	3,050
Myanmar	12,221
India	3,488
Vietnam	1,965
Bangladesh	3,036
Pakistan	6,217
Filipina	3,335
Kemboja	307
China	2,033
Thailand	463
Sri Lanka	77
Laos	30
Others	188
Total	187,743

Table 1 Statistics for Issuance of Foreign Workers Pass until 31 December 2010 According to Country in the Construction Industry in Malaysia

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