

A Study of the Attitudes of Sri Lankan Professionals towards Learning Business English

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Introduction

English is the most extensively spoken language in many different contexts in the world. It can be said that English language is not only an international language, but also a global language.

“English has the status of a global language in the sense that, it has developed a special role that is recognised in every country, either as an official language or as a language which is given priority in the country’s foreign-language teaching (Crystal, 2005).”

A few centuries ago, English was spoken by only five to seven million people, today there are more non-native users than native users of English, and English has become the linguistic key used for opening borders: it is a global medium with local identities and messages (Kachru 1996: 11, 14). Now English has become a world language, spoken by at least 750 million people. It is more broadly spoken and written than any other language, even Latin, has ever been. It can, certainly, be said, to be the first truly global language. English is today the dominant or official language in more than 60 countries. This occurs due to the ever increasing process of globalization. Globalization influences every possible feature of life; Globalization has formed a smaller world for people. When people of dissimilar environment meet, they require communication by a particular language as mean of communication. English is used by people in just about every

part of the world. English is not merely used when people speak with English speakers; it is used by natives of different. As a result, English is unquestionably the international language of business since we are living in the world of business changing as rapid as it has never had before, we find ourselves with new and ever growing challenges, when it comes to learning Business English. In Sri Lanka, English is not used only for the utilitarian purpose but also as the Business Language and Lingua Franca. It has emerged as an essential skill for multinational and multilingual environment, which is common in Sri Lanka from past few decades.

In the corporate world, the correct usage of English language is more important, which contribute to the identity of a successful business professional. It is must to learn business English for Sri Lanka as business professionals, to carry out the business, and also to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. Learning the art of business communication is essential for the professionals to grow and prosper in all the spheres of professional life. It can be said that a good command over English language can be an asset for a professional to enter and just win in the world of excellence and prosperity.

As the demands for business English increases in recent years, an extensive amount of research has been done on business English (**Barbara, Celani, Collins, & Scott, 1996; Charles, 1996; Louhiala-Salminen, 1996 Eustace, 1996; St. John, 1996, Gimenez, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2006; Chew, 2005; Grosse, 2005; 2002; Nickerson, 2005**).

In recent times, business English also has been given much responsiveness, as English is regarded as a lingua Franca in international business contexts (**Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005; Nickerson, 2005; Rogerson-Revell, 2005**).

Most of the research, however, has been conducted on discourse analysis of business communication, or business communication skills and strategies, genre analysis of business writing, such as (Jenkins & Hinds, 1987; Bhatia, 1993; Eustace, 1996; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000, 2002, 2005; Akar, 2002; Santos, 2002) have mainly focused on business letters and email communication, examining detailed moves that distinguish a certain type of business English texts as well as cultural aspects of a particular discourse community that affect acceptable moves and rhetoric of the text.

Discourse analysis research on business communication (Charles, 1996; de Beaugrande, 2000; Gimenez, 2001; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002, and Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005) has investigated discourse patterns of frequently used in business English communication tasks such as business meetings and negotiations. These studies have shown not only discourse patterns attributed to the tasks but also other aspects influencing discourse patterns, including characteristics like business relationship, degree of formality, and cross-cultural traits. Research on business English communication skills and strategies (Barbara et al., 1996; Louhiala-Salminen, 1996; St. John, 1996; de Beaugrande, 2000; Chew, 2005;) started by investigating frequently used business communication skills, but then shifted its focus into communication approaches for successful communication in business, applying the implications of discourse analysis research on business English use. In addition, most of the analyses conducted on business English have been case studies dealing with specific situations such as a textile company in Hong Kong (Li Somui & Mead, 2000), senior German bankers (Edwards, 2000), or Singapore accountants (Yin & Wong, 1990). Hence the results of these studies are not directly applicable to the target chapters in the current study although they should offer awareness into types

of tasks that may be of concern. There have been some studies that have tried to refine general business English tasks. St. John (1996) and Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) suggested a set of core business skills based on studies by Holden (1993) and Yin and Wong (1990). The skills comprised oral skills (such as telephoning, giving presentations, taking part in meetings, socializing and negotiating) and written skills (including report writing). Louhiala-Salminen (1996) conducted a survey study on the written business communications of Finnish business professionals and reported the following written English business communication situations:

- (a) Exchange of written messages (letters, faxes, telexes, and email), (b) writing reports,
- (c) and reading professional journals and other publications, (d) translation, and (e) writing official documents.

A study based on survey on communication patterns of the Brazilian business context (**Barbara et al., 1996**) identified reports, memos, proposals, projects, prospectuses meetings, and presentations as the most frequently performed business writing tasks. In an analysis on Mexican business executives, Grosse (2004) reported the leading comprehensive and up-to-date business English tasks, including phone call, fax email correspondence, telephone, face-to-face conference or video, writing business letters, presentation, negotiation, business trips, training programs ,products exhibition, attending foreign company's guest, professional reading, meetings, and Internet research.

Research Questions

What is the attitude of business professionals towards learning business English? Are they considering it as the positive factor for their personal and professional growth?

Objective of the study

The present study will give insight towards learning of business English for Sri Lankan Business professionals which seems to mandate for their personal as well as company's growth. Main focus area is as follows.

1) To find out the attitude of Sri Lankan professionals towards learning Business English

Research Methodology

This research is descriptive in nature. Survey methods are frequently used to collect descriptive data.

Sampling tool

A questionnaire as a research instrument with 16 questions was designed, to accomplish the research aim. The questionnaire is addressed to 100 business professionals covering the whole island.

Data collection

Data collection is the process of gathering and measuring information on variables of interest, in an established systematic fashion that enables one to answer stated research questions, and evaluate outcomes. Both the primary and secondary data have been used for the analysis purpose.

Primary data

The Primary data was collected through quantitative approach; the survey was conducted in the form of questionnaire included 16 questions, to explore the importance and role of business English and need of learning Business English language skills for Sri Lankan Business professionals.

Secondary data

The secondary data for this research work was collected through various sources like books, journals, website and Literature on ‘English language’ and ‘business English’.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Data Analysis

Analysis of data is a process of inspecting, cleaning, transforming, and modeling data with the goal of discovering useful information, suggesting conclusions, and supporting decision-making. The questionnaire is addressed to these professionals with the closed ended questions to have their views about the role of Business English language in workplace and to get their opinion about the need of learning Business English for conducting successful Business. The responses obtained, were first transformed into numerical form and tabulated, after which the Excel's Pivot Table was used to calculate frequencies and percentages for each question, to see the view of professionals in a certain way.

Results and Interpretations

1. Learning English for business purposes is must.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
87	13	0	100

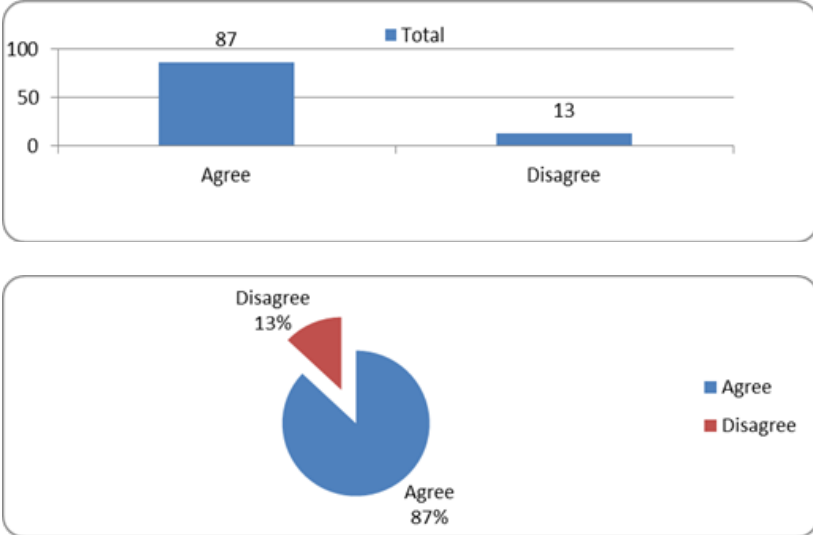


Fig (1)

87% business professionals believed “learning English for the business purpose is must”, while 13% disagreed with the fact.

Result showed majority of professional agreed with the fact that it was must to learn English for carrying out business successfully whereas only few professionals did not believe in learning English language, they believed in the number of years of experience they had, and also on the technical skills they possessed.

2. It is mandatory to speak English during working hours at our office.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
35	63	2	100

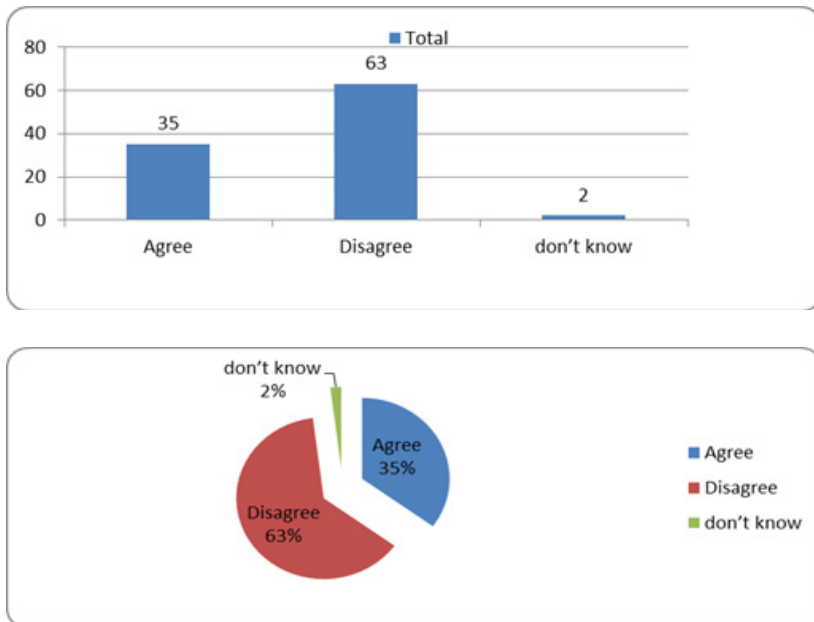


Fig (2)

The responses were quite surprising, only 35% professionals were agreed and 63% were disagreed about the statement- “It is mandatory to speak English during working hours at your office”. When investigating about the reason behind it, there were few reasons given by them-

- a) For entry level communication in English was mandatory.
- b) Lower and middle level employees preferred Sinhala to communicate because it was easier to understand.
- c) Top level officials communicated only in English.

3. There are much chances of personal growth if person is well versed with English.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
82	15	3	100

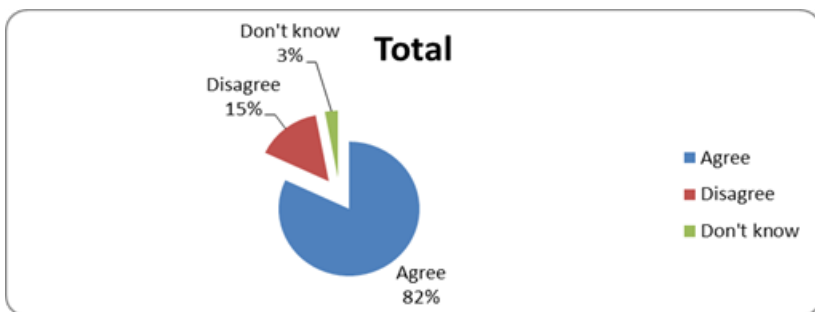
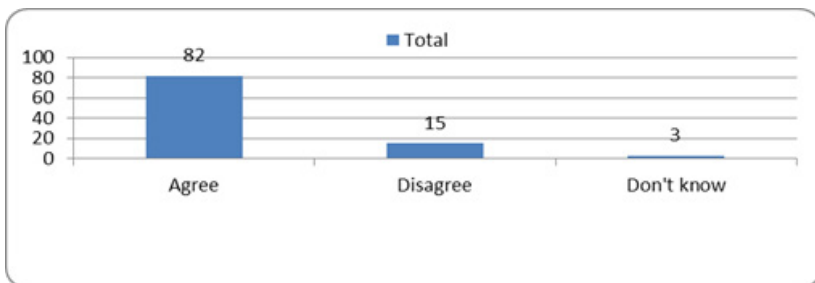


Fig. (3)

82% professionals believed “There are much chances of personal growth if person is well versed with English”. 15% professionals disagreed and 3% did not have any view.

Majority of professionals accepted that, for personal growth it was important to be well versed with English. Professionals, who did not believe in this fact, believed in experience and hard work rather than professional skills.

4. English is considered as the positive factor for country’s Gross National Income.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON’T KNOW	TOTAL
83	13	4	100

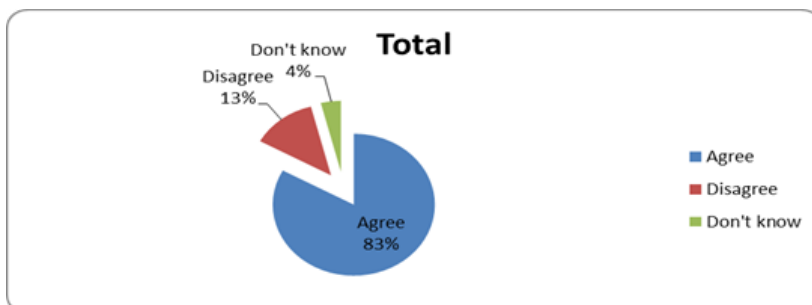
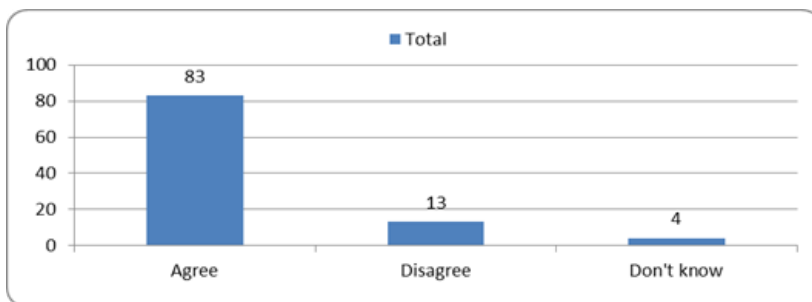


Fig. (4)

83% professionals considered English as positive factor for country’s economic growth, 13% professionals disagreed with this fact, while only 4% professionals did not have any view.

The result showed that there was close relation between English proficiency and country’s Gross National Income.

5. A person with good English language skills is an asset for the company.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
63	32	5	100

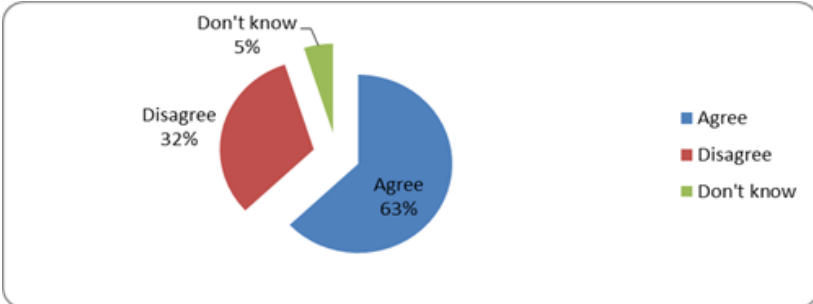
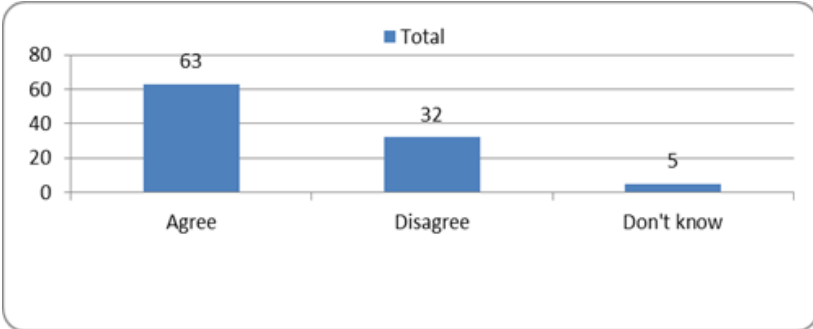


Fig (5)

Obtained responses were confusing, as only 63% professionals felt that ‘A person with good English language skills is an asset for the company’. 32% professionals were disagreed with the fact whereas 5% did not have any view.

It showed that there were only one third Sri Lankan professionals who did not believe that “A person with good English language skills is an asset for the company”, but still majority of Sri Lankan business professional agreed with the said fact.

6. English speaking and personality development classes are helpful for professional career.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
88	8	4	100

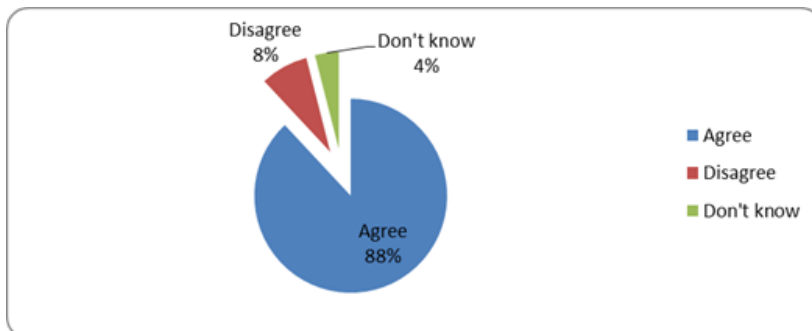
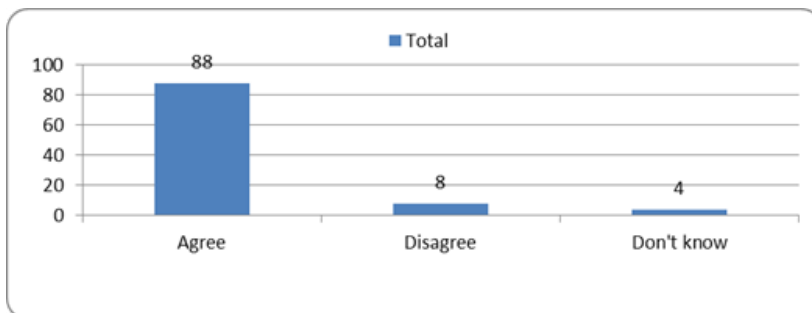


Fig. (6)

88% professionals believed “English speaking and Personality Development classes are helpful for professional career”, only 8% professionals disagreed and 4% did not have any view. It showed that English speaking and personality development classes were important for making successful professional career. Sri Lankan business professionals believed in polishing their soft skills to outshine in their jobs and also to build a rapport with their clients and customers.

7. English is crucial for business and company growth.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
66	28	6	100

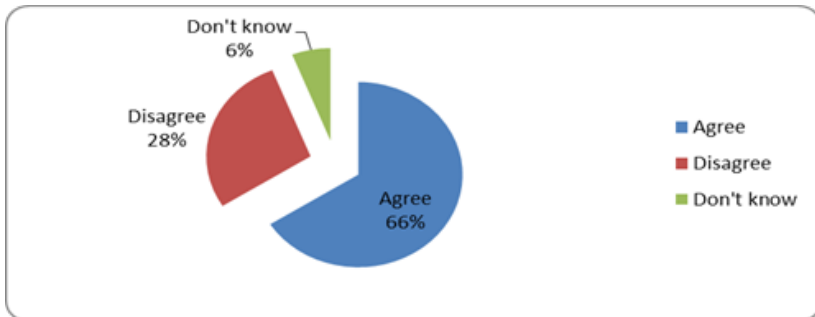
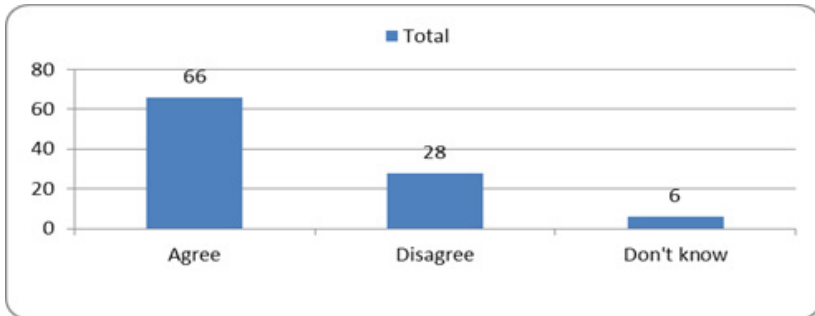


Fig (7)

66% professionals believed “English is crucial for business and company growth”. Whereas 28% professionals disagreed and 6% did not have any view about this.

It showed, approximately one third Sri Lankan professionals believed that English was not crucial for business, but still majority of professionals agreed with the fact that it was crucial for the business and company growth.

8. In a global scenario, command over English makes all the difference to your personality and ability.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
85	13	2	100

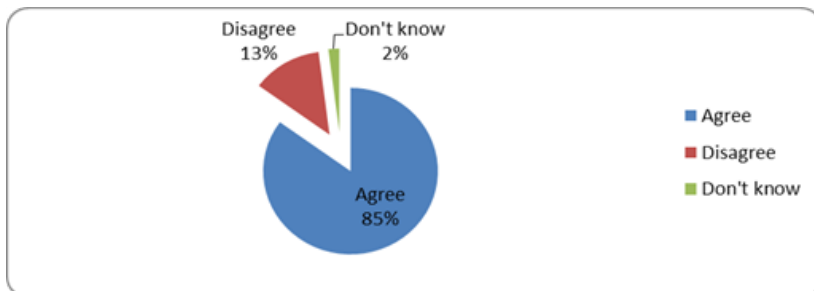
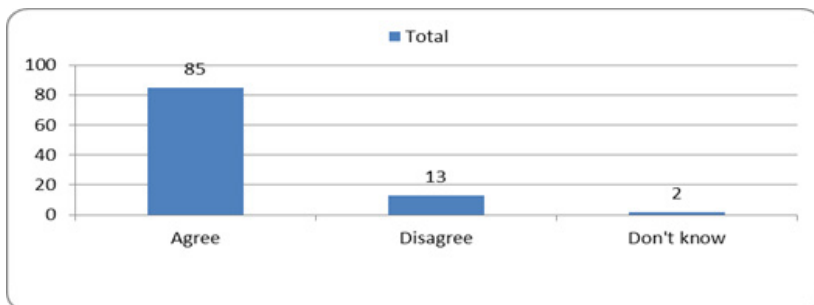


Fig (8)

85% professionals believed “command over English makes all the difference to your personality and ability in a global scenario.” 13% professionals found ‘disagreed’, and 2% did not have any view.

Majority of professionals agreed with the fact, that in this global era, command over English makes all the difference to their personality and ability.

9. It is easy to communicate in English than native language at workplace.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
48	42	10	100

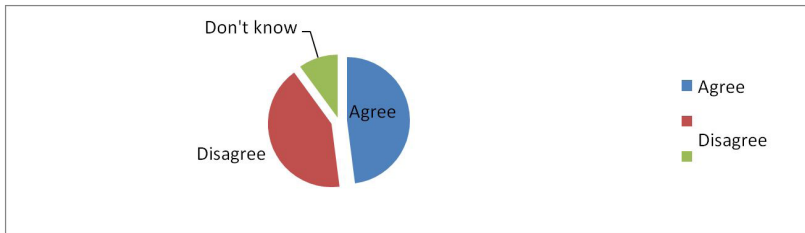
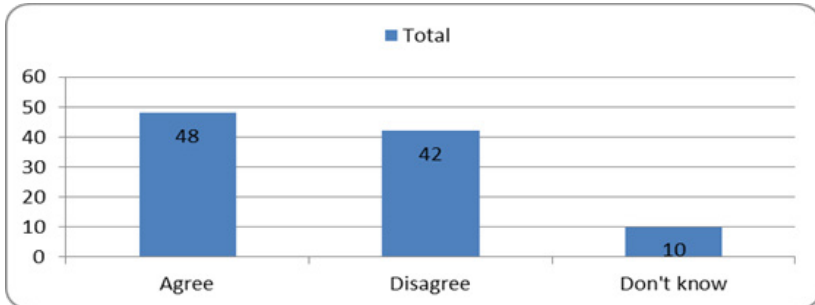


Fig (9)

48% professionals felt easy to communicate in English than the native language at workplace, where 42% felt talking in native language was easier as compared to English, 10% did not have any view. Responses of earlier questions were in favour of learning English language, but when it came to the matter of 'ease', it did not create a clear picture.

10. Those with good knowledge of English do not necessarily make good communication.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
64	33	3	100

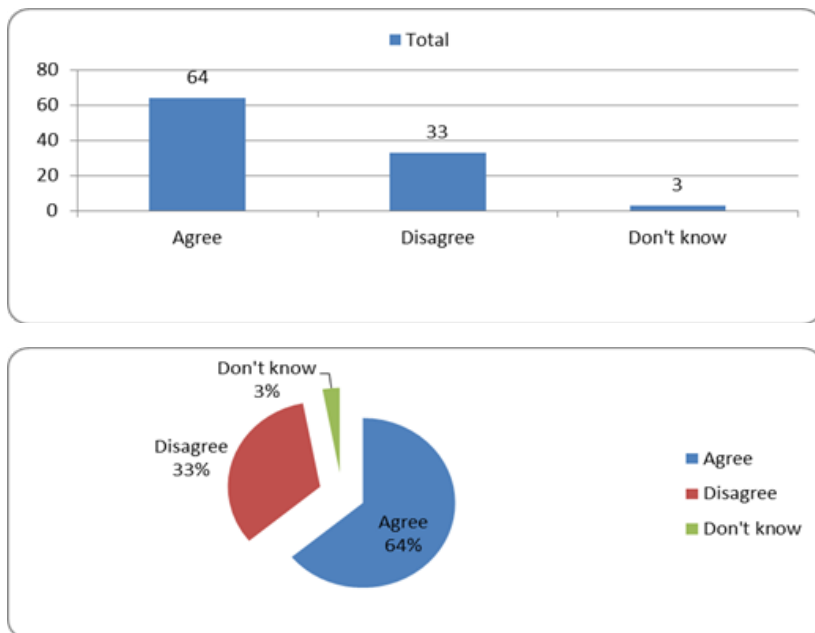


Fig (10)

64% professionals believed “Those with good knowledge of English do not necessarily make good communication”. 33% professional disagreed and 3% did not have any view.

Result showed that, professionals knew the fact that it was important to have knowledge of English language, but excellent communication skills were also one of the prime determinants of success in business world.

11. It is easy to learn business English than Standard English.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
57	20	23	100

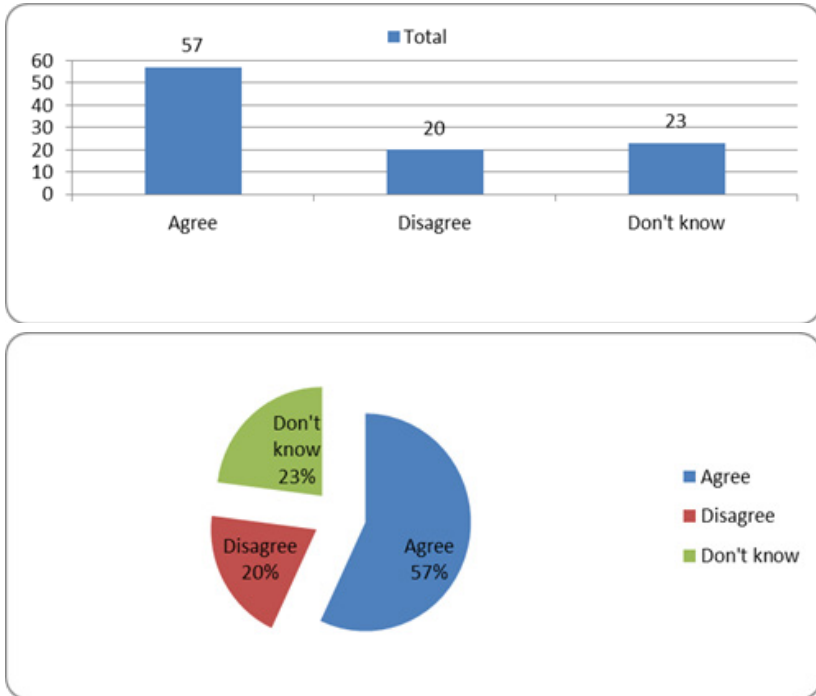


Fig (11)

Different responses were received when asked “it is easy to learn business English than Standard English’. Only 57% professionals agreed, while 20% professional disagreed and 23% (highest yet) did not have any idea.

It showed that few professionals were not much aware with the term business English. They did not know exactly the difference in between Business English and Standard English. So, there was a need to generate awareness.

12. Learning business English is important for efficient management and implementation of business policies.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
79	15	6	100

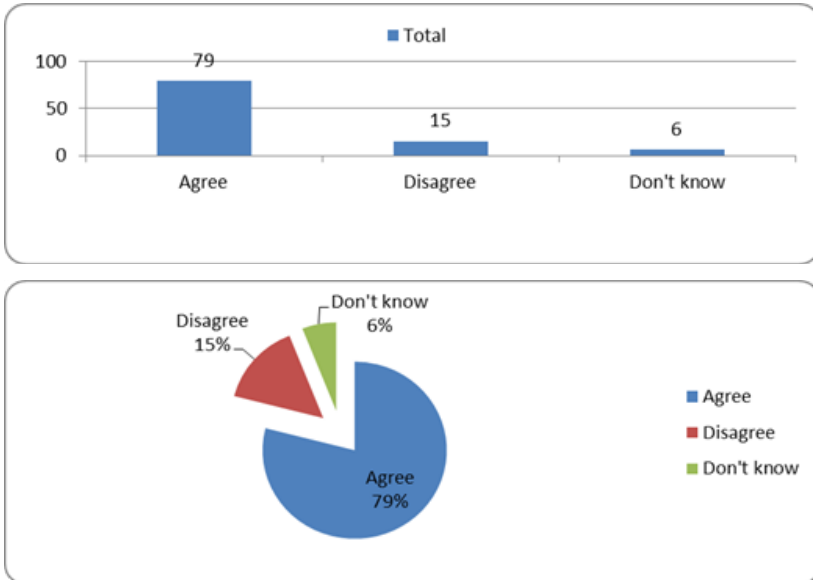


Fig (12)

79% professionals said that they were agreed with the fact “Learning business English is important for efficient management and implementation of business policies’, while 15% professional disagreed and 6% did not have any view.

It showed majority of professionals believed in learning business English for efficient management and implementation of business policies.

13. Using business English idioms and phrases helps to impress others during business meetings.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
78	17	5	100

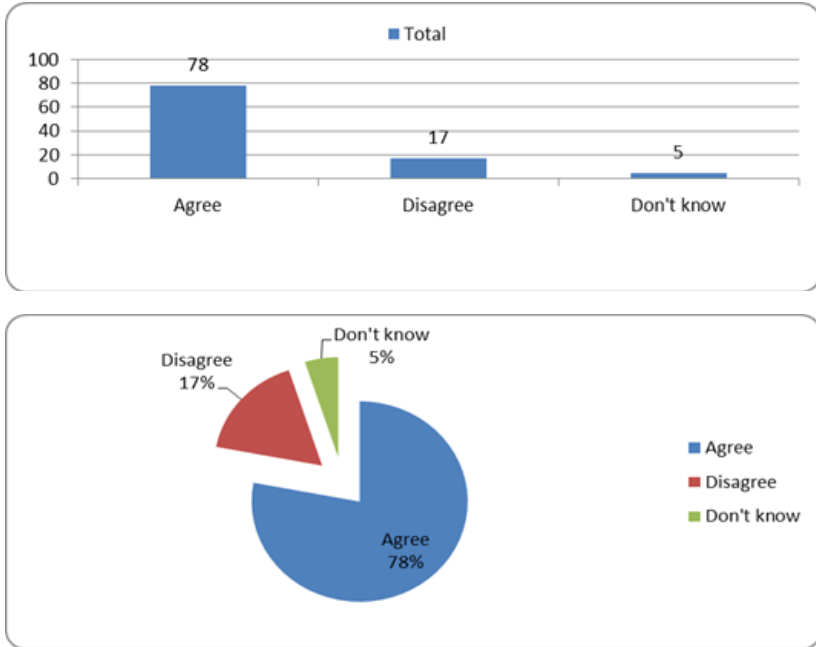


Fig (13)

78% professionals believed that Using business English idioms and phrases helped to impress others during business meetings while 17% professional disagreed and 5% did not have any idea about this. It showed Business professionals believed to become proficient in English’s for conducting successful business meetings.

14. Unprofessional writing (e-mail, business letters, presentation, memos, report etc.) can damage the company’s image and also the impression of the individual.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
93	4	3	100

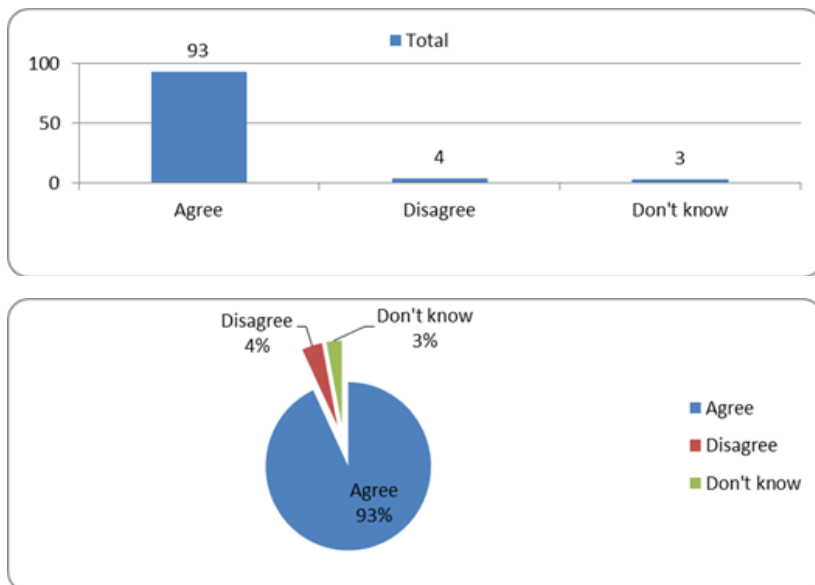


Fig (14)

93% business professionals agreed with the fact “Unprofessional writing (e-mail, business letters, presentation, memos, report etc.) can damage the company’s image and also the impression of the individual”. Only 4% professional disagreed and 3% did not have any idea about this.

It means lack of correct written communication skills and the inability to communicate with the customers would tarnish the brand image of the company.

15. Writing skills matter a lot in business correspondence.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
75	15	10	100

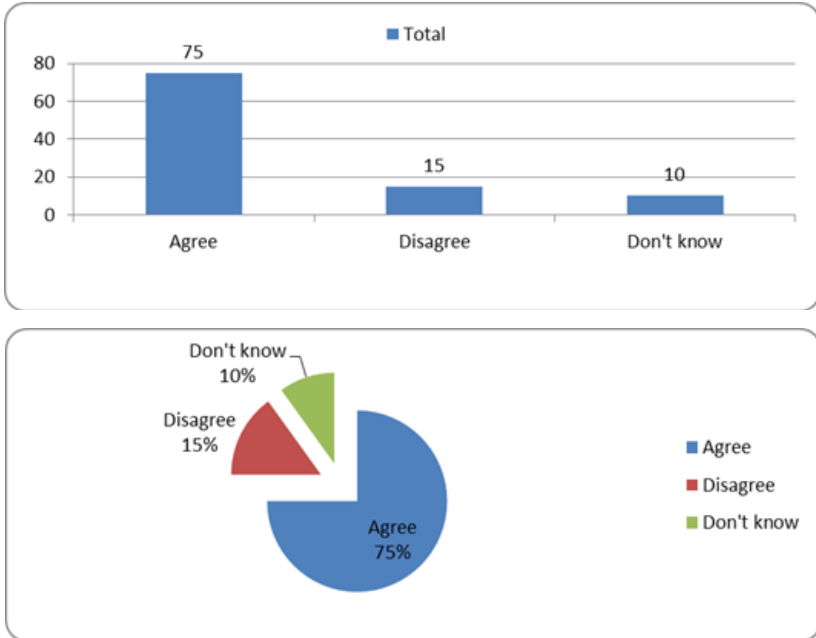


Fig (15)

75% business professionals believed “Writing skills matter a lot in business correspondence”. 15 % disagreed, and 10% replied as “don’t know”. It showed that majority of professionals believed that writing skills had great importance in business dealing.

16. The corporate image of the company will be affected if employees are inconsistent in communication.

AGREE	DISAGREE	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
87	10	3	100

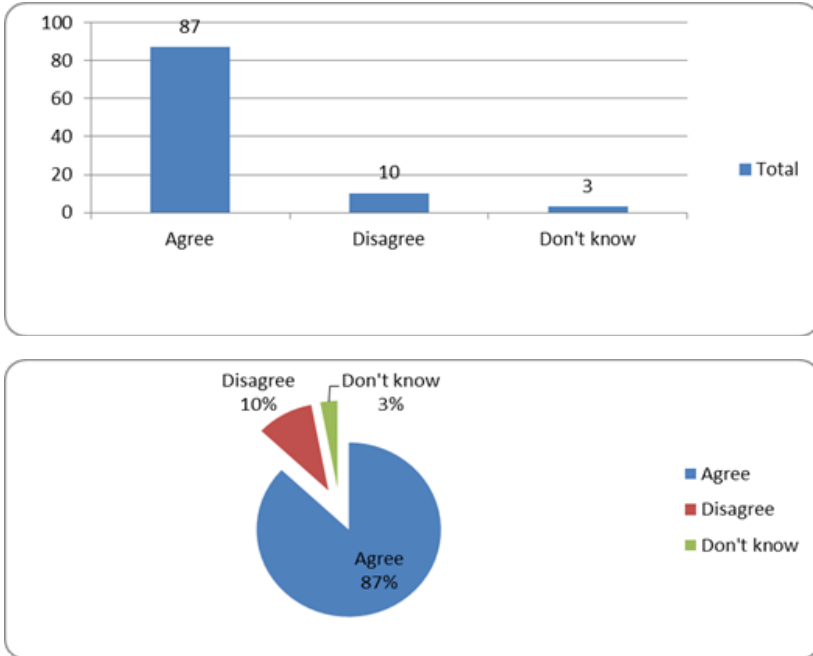


Fig (16)

87% professionals believed that the corporate image of the company would be affected if employees were inconsistent in communication. Only 10% disagreed and 3% clicked at “don’t know”.

It showed that lack of communication skills could affect the corporate image of the company, hence again it was clear that having good communication skills were essential for professionals.

Findings of the Study

Business English language skills can contribute to better job performance in Sri Lanka. It is observed that employees with English language skills seem to have better chances for promotion and wider career choices. It is also found that majority of professionals want companies to build encouraging

environment for practicing business English language skills. Some major points of findings are given below;

1) The Business professionals who agreed by most of the facts are-

- i. Top officials
- ii. Ambitious professionals

2) Majority of Business professionals who disagreed by most of the facts are-

- i. Hard workers but necessarily not smart workers
- ii. Non-ambitious persons

3) Professionals who did not give opinion are-

- i. Inert professionals
- ii. Reserve people who are somehow afraid of and insecure about their career.

The findings are drawn on the basis of following factors-

- a) General knowledge
- b) Awareness
- c) Interest towards enhancing the skills
- d) Competitive work environment

Survey revealed that there is Importance of Business English language for professionals in Sri Lanka, as 87% Sri Lankan Business professionals agreed with the fact that learning English for business purpose is must, 79% professionals said that

learning Business English is important for efficient management and for implementing business policies. 93% business professionals believed that unprofessional writing can damage the company's image and also the impression of the individual and 96% professionals said that Company must organize some personality development workshop(s) for its employees.

Research Conclusion

The results of survey revealed that, in Sri Lanka mastering in business English language skills is crucial for professional progression, as 87% Sri Lankan business professionals agreed that learning English for business purpose is must, and 79% professionals believed that learning Business English is important for efficient management and implementation of business policies. 93% business professionals believed that unprofessional writing can damage the company brands as well as the impression of individual, and 96% professionals said Company must organize some personality development workshops for its employees. Today English is not used only for the utilitarian purpose by Sri Lankans but also as the Business Language or/and Lingua Franca. It has emerged as essential skills to be adapted for multinational and multilingual environment.

English is the language of business, industries and organizations in Sri Lanka and abroad. Thus multinational companies require their employees to have adequate language competencies. English is unquestionably the international language of business in present era. The world of business is changing and growing so rapidly that new challenges come before the professionals to learning business English, which is a mandate to survive in highly competitive world of business. In the corporate world, only speaking in English language is not sufficient but correct usage of English in a specific manner is

more important, which contributes to the identity of a successful business professional.

Sri Lankan Business Professionals require business English skills to grow and prosper in all the spheres of life. It helps to mark their presence in the global world as well. Acquaintance with the art of business communication is the key to success in professional environment. Business English language skill is essential to carry out the business successfully and also to communicate with people of different cultures. All in all, a good command over English can be one's passport to the world of excellence and prosperity.

As a consequence of globalization, big international companies increasingly use English as a corporate language, and today English seems to be perceived as an essential part of employees' competencies. It is a fact that English is the principal global language used to facilitate communication in a multinational and multilingual environment. In Sri Lanka the majority of business professionals feel that English language skills are required to work efficiently in all the good companies. It has been found that Sri Lankan business professionals want companies to build encouraging environment for practicing business English language skills, as Business English and communication skills are the most important route to meet the demands of current Business world.

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