

Workplace Written Literacy And Its Effect On The Curriculum

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Abstract

Fennick et al. (1993) identify employees poor writing skills on different writing requirements between school and work. The results of a research conducted by Sidy (1999) indicated that the participants could not relate what they did in freshman writing classes to the types of writing they have to do in the workplace. The objective of this paper is to discuss workplace written literacy demands and the levels of written literacy among applicants for a job at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Data was collected using interviews and a written test. The findings suggest that there exists a mismatch between written literacy demands and the levels of the applicants. Hence, there is a need to look at the present curriculum in written literacy both at secondary and tertiary levels with a view to incorporate workplace literacy components.

Introduction

Graduates are facing more challenges in securing employment these days. Because of the stiff competition and a surplus of work force in the job market, these graduates need to be well equipped with the necessary skills required for the job. One of the crucial skills is to be able to communicate well in writing, especially in English. This is more so in Malaysia where English is a second language and its role is becoming more important. As a result, the focus of written correspondence should be to meet the standard of language communication. Therefore, graduates entering the workforce should come to grips with the demands of the social, economic, cultural and linguistic consequences of the global spread of English. These include meeting the demands of communicating effectively in various types of writing such as business letters, memos, reports and so forth. Thus, the objectives of the study are to identify the written literacy levels of Malaysian graduates entering the workforce and to examine the demands of workplace written literacy.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are the written literacy levels of the Malaysian graduates?
2. What are the demands of workplace written literacy?

Literature Review

Surveys of professional writing in the workplace have documented that writing is a frequent activity in a variety of professions (Anderson, 1985; Faigley, 1985; Kirtz & Reep, 1990). Although professionals who write on the job may not define themselves as writers, surveys have documented that these professionals may spend anywhere from 15% to 30% of their time engaged in writing (Anderson, 1985; Roth, 1993). As employees move up the corporate ladder, more writing is frequently required of them and written communication skills become more important than technical skills (Roth, 1993).

Studies in workplace writing have taken a variety of different focuses, including surveys of recent graduates entering in the workforce (Siti Hamin et al. 2005; Wiggs, 1993) or, in some instances, studying the transition students make from academic writing to writing in the workplace (Siti Hamin and Ismie Roha 2005; Winsor, 1996). Previous studies that have sought to examine specific writing behaviours of professionals have focused on business executives (Gallion and Kavan, 1994), nurse managers (Spears, 1996), production workers (Mills, 2002), hospitality workers (Siti Hamin and Ismie Roha, 2005), and a variety of other professional discourse communities (Odell, 1985; Spilka, 1993).

Findings from Siti Hamin et al. (2005) study reveal that graduates who applied for jobs in an organization are found to be inadequate and ineffective in terms of ideas, accuracy and presentation as portrayed in their writing samples. If these respondents are accepted for a job, then they will encounter difficulties in fulfilling workplace writing demands. The most important finding in this study is that there exists a mismatch between the respondents' level of written literacy in English and the writing demands at the workplace. A similar finding is reported by Siti Hamin and Ismie Roha (2005) when they claim that there is a mismatch between what writing courses offer at institutions and the real needs of writing in the tourism and hotel industries.

When writers learn how to write on the job, instruction frequently takes quite a different approach than in the classroom. Researching writing within Research and Development organization, Paradis et al. (1985) have identified the process of "document cycling" in which employees send a document to a supervisor and the supervisor returns the document to the employee with notes for revision as a common way employees learn to write on the job as well as learn about the culture of their particular organization. This type of "instruction by trial and error" has been identified in other studies of workplace writing (Spears 1996: 61), along with other techniques such as novice writers seeking

advice from more experienced colleagues, reading business writing handbooks on their own, or, more often than not, looking to model documents within the organization as examples (Redish, 1989).

Fennick et al. (1993) blame the employees' poor writing skills on their education when they claim that part of the reason why students are unable to write effectively in workplace positions is because their school writing has been far different from what is required in their actual workplace situations. Research conducted by Sidy (1999) examines the relevance of freshman composition to writing in the workplace. Four professionals who had graduated from college for several years were asked about their writing in the workplace, college writing classes and the importance of skills employers expected. The results indicated that:

- All participants felt that effective workplace writing must be job-related, concise and clear,
- All participants have negative attitudes towards the writing classes they had because there is a vast mismatch between the type of writing studied and the expectations and requirements of their jobs.

In general, research suggests that the participants could not relate what they did in the freshman writing classes to the types of writing they have to do in the workplace.

Methodology

The research method in this study is a case study (single case and single site). Two instruments were used to collect data for this study. The first instrument is the writing task, which is designed by four experts in ESL. They had a minimum of 10 years each in teaching, designing syllabi, curricula, course contents and assessing in ESL contexts. The format of the writing task is letter writing. The reason for selecting this task is due to the fact that respondents needed to write a letter when they first applied for a job. In addition, letter writing is one of the most frequent types of writing required by potential employees.

For the purpose of gathering data, four different questions were designed and typed on different colour-coded cards. These colour-coded cards were distributed alternately on the table. The applicants were instructed to enter the examination hall and choose their own seat. They were required to answer whatever colour-coded question card that was placed randomly on the table. The writing assessment was administered in a lecture hall to avoid copying or cheating.

ESL experts graded the essays and internal consistency of the grades was controlled by inter-raters. The holistic scoring guide used in this study was adapted from the Advanced Writing course offered at UKM. It focuses on the content e.g. main ideas, supporting details, writing conventions as well as accuracy of language. The scoring guide is based on 6 bands as described in Appendix A.

The sampling strategy employed for this study was purposeful sampling. According to Merriam (1998:61), “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned”. The research sample comprised 205 candidates who sat for the writing test. They are fresh graduates as well as in-service officers who are applying for the post of administrative officers (e.g. assistant registrar and security officer) at a local university. The writing test is used as a screening process where the results will qualify them for a job interview.

During the assessment session, the following steps were taken:

1. Colour-coded questions were distributed alternately on the tables
2. Respondents were asked to take their seats randomly
3. A short briefing was conducted by the head invigilator
4. The candidates were given 1 hour to complete the task
5. All scripts were collected and marked holistically by experienced examiners using the scoring guide (see Appendix A)
6. The respondents were instructed to complete the self-report questionnaire

Written Literacy Demands at Workplace

The qualitative data will describe the writing demands at the workplace based on experienced informants. The identified informants were both females and degree holders. The first respondent was denoted as N, and had 25 years of experience. The second respondent, S had 12 years of working experience in UKM. Both were in their forties.

Both respondents mentioned without hesitation that the ability of writing in English was very important. Their jobs required them to write in English whenever necessary. Respondent N wrote about 10 writing tasks a day whereas respondent S seldom wrote major tasks in English except when responding to emails. If there were any letters written in English, she would then reply in English but this was very seldom.

Both respondents performed the following types of writing tasks in English: letters, working papers, prospectuses and emails. In addition, respondent N also wrote reports, which was not done by respondent S. Instead, respondent S wrote proposals. Neither of the respondents wrote minutes of meetings in English. Minutes were written in Malay. Depending on the type of the writing task, text length ranged from 1 to 20 pages with 1 page for letter writing and 20 pages for working papers. Respondent N took about 10 minutes for a one-page letter and 1 hour for a 10-page report while respondent S spent 1–2 hours when writing letters, and a week for articles. Respondent S wrote to both local and overseas personnel but respondent N dealt only with overseas personnel. In terms of writing to institutions, respondent S wrote to both local (embassies in Malaysia) and overseas institutions. Respondent N on the other hand, did not write to any of these institutions.

Respondent S translated, edited, proofread and wrote articles for newsletters in English in comparison to respondent N, who only translated and did not do the rest. Both respondents sent their written products to co-workers for editing to confirm the content and presentation of language.

Both respondents agreed that being proficient in writing in English was important in their line of work. Specifically, respondent N felt that it was important because she was involved in international programs and indirectly she had to deal with international students. Additionally, she stipulated that it was also important for her own personal development. As for respondent S, she felt that being proficient in writing in English was important because, besides being the editor for a newsletter and establishing networks, she also had to reply to e-mails and letters in English.

According to respondent N, there were courses offered by the Unit Latihan at UKM as follow-up actions taken by the institution to improve the staffs' proficiency in written English. However, respondent S mentioned that there were specific courses offered by INTAN (an institution outside UKM) but there were no courses offered by UKM.

Based on the respondents' feedback, it can be concluded that being proficient in written English is very important in the job specifications of an assistant registrar at UKM. This is because they are required to produce various types of writing tasks in English such as letters, e-mails, minutes, reports, working papers, articles and prospectuses. These findings are supported by Anderson (1985) who emphasizes the importance of writing because it consumes a substantial portion of the working day for almost all college-educated workers. In fact, the average worker spends 20% of his or her time writing on the job. Fennick et al. (1993) report that students who cannot write well either do not get jobs for which they are otherwise qualified for, or they do not receive promotions.

Written Literacy Level of Malaysian Graduates

The quantitative data will describe the applicants' levels of written literacy. The sample is 205 graduates, of which 66 were male and 139 female applicants. The descriptive analysis of the results is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Writing score of applicants

SCORING BANDS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Band 1	17	8.3
Band 2	44	21.5
Band 3	57	27.8
Band 4	43	21.0
Band 5	23	11.2
Band 6	21	10.2
Total	205	100.0

From the analysis, 17 applicants (8.3%) seems to belong to band 1 which means that they are 'very weak'. 44 applicants (21.5%) belong to band 2 which is 'weak' and 57 applicants (27.8%) fall into the 'fair' group (band 3). Next, 43 respondents (21%) are considered to be 'good' as they belong to band 4. 23 applicants (11.2%) obtain 'very good' as they are placed under band 5. Finally, 21 applicants (10.2%) have achieved the highest level 'excellent' that is band 6. Based on this result, the majority of the applicants' written literacy fall under the 'fair' (Band 3) category. This means that they have committed some major errors in addition to many minor errors, but on the whole, the errors do not affect meaning. The presentation of ideas is adequate but not satisfactory in terms of writing effectiveness. The level of vocabulary used is adequate for simple writing tasks only but there are flaws in organization and coherence. The statistics also shows that more than 57% of the applicants belong to the 'fair' category and below (band 3 and below). The rest of the applicants belong to the higher bands (band 4 to band 6). In general, the level of written literacy among the applicants is 'fair' and below. This is reflected in the ideas presented in their writing tasks which are not adequate and effective.

Summary of the Findings

The result of the writing test indicates that the majority of the applicants are 'fair' writers or weaker than 'fair'. The applicants' writing texts were found to be inadequate and ineffective in terms of ideas, accuracy and presentation. If these applicants were to be accepted for a job, then they would encounter difficulties in fulfilling the demands of the workplace. The findings suggest that there exists a mismatch between the applicants' level of written literacy in English and the writing demands at the workplace. The data from the interview with the two university officers reveal that the ability to write in English is very important in this organization. This is supported by Anderson (1985), who emphasizes the importance of writing because it consumes a substantial portion of the working day for almost all college-educated workers.

Implications for the Secondary and Tertiary Level Curriculum on Written Literacy

Based on the study, it seems that qualifications on paper were not the only criterion to secure a job interview. All applicants who were called for the writing test had appropriate qualification for the post. Since there were too many applicants and job vacancies were limited, prospective employers had to conduct a screening process to select the most suitable candidates. Thus, graduates face greater challenges in securing jobs these days compared to their former counterparts. Those who are weak in writing skills do not get the jobs for which they are otherwise qualified. Employers should not assume that graduates entering the workplace are proficient in writing. Thus, there is an urgent need to bridge this gap. One of the ways to do this is by equipping them with the necessary workplace writing skills in English before they embark on their professional career.

Issues addressed by previous studies of workplace writing, and as highlighted in the findings of this study, suggest some ways in which we can reconcile what takes place in the writing classroom with the type of writing that occurs in the workplace. In the Malaysian classrooms, students are only exposed to general types of writing such as narratives, expository, persuasive and so on. Recently, the government has introduced English for Science and Technology as one of the secondary school's curricula. Hence, a professional writing course is deemed necessary, as students should be prepared for the real world - they need to survive in the workplace. This writing component should be included in secondary school syllabi as well as integrated in the college and university curricula.

Suggestions for Workplace Writing Tasks

We should be looking for ways to bring the real world into the classroom as the focus of a professional writing course is writing for the real world. Simulations and role plays are useful in providing realistic content to the students. A suggested workplace writing tasks will be like role plays in well-defined scenarios in order to model such real-world circumstances. For example, an instructor could divide the students into small groups, each representing a real company. Students can adopt roles within this organization and create their job titles on an organizational chart. From here, the instructor could present students with a communication problem within the organization. Within this context, students would decide which documents need to be written to which audience based on the company's perspectives. Students, both individually and collaboratively, could prepare these documents and "send" them to the intended readers.

Students can also develop a communication portfolio for each of these documents (letters, e-mails, minutes, reports, working papers, articles and prospectuses). They will need to decide how well the document addresses their information needs and if it adequately addresses their perceived needs as stakeholders in the organization. They can provide feedback to the writer and suggest how the document needs to be revised to meet their needs. Such an activity allows students to become both readers and writers of the documents, from various perspectives with respect to the issue raised.

The writing teacher will play a role of workplace reader, where he/she can set a specific goal or outcome for a particular writing task (e.g. a memo to address employees' request for a family day). The students would write a draft of the memo for the teacher's approval. The teacher then can accept or reject a draft based on whether it addresses the problem according to the teacher's perceptions. If the paper is initially rejected, the student must further attempt to meet the informational needs of the workplace reader by communicating with the reader, attempting to negotiate meaning, and eventually appropriately revising the document.

Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that there is a mismatch between the level of writing skills of Malaysian graduates who participated in this research and the expected demands of workplace writing. Part of the reason why students are unable to write effectively is because their school writing has been far different from what is required in their actual communication situations. And in fact, the present curriculum does not include professional or workplace writing as one of the courses. Students are only exposed to general types of writing and they are expected to be able to write well in their professional career without any exposure to such writings. In order to solve this mismatch, professional writing courses must be offered as one of the courses either at the secondary or the tertiary level of education.

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Appendix A
Scoring Rubrics for Writing Test

Band	Description of work
6 Excellent	The writing is very organised (Thesis, main ideas and details are clearly evident), coherent (good link between sentences, paragraphs and ideas) and grammatical. Ideas are presented in a very effective and attractive manner. Possesses a very high level of vocabulary – varied and impressive.
5 Very good	The writing is well organised, coherent and grammatical (with occasional slips). Ideas are presented effectively. Possesses a high level of vocabulary – appropriate and accurate word choice.
4 Good	The writing is organised, reasonably coherent (occasionally you find ideas or sentences that don't link well) and grammatical (with some minor errors). Presentation of ideas is not as effective as in above but quite satisfactory. Possesses an adequate level of vocabulary to tackle college level writing tasks.
3 Fair	There are flaws in organisation and coherence, but some pattern of organisation is still evident (some points could be out of place, linking devices may be missing, main points may not be clearly stated). Some major errors in addition to many minor errors, but on the whole, the errors do not affect meaning. The presentation of ideas is less satisfactory than in above but adequate. Level of vocabulary is adequate for simple writing tasks only.
2 Weak	Organisation is flawed (Thesis may be missing, main points may not be in a proper order or even completely missing). Essay is not coherent – little use of linking devices. Many major and minor grammar errors – meaning is affected in some parts of the essay. Presentation of ideas is not effective but you can make out the message. Possesses a limited level of vocabulary – inadequate for college level writing tasks.
1 Very weak	The writer has very limited ability to present ideas to reader (difficult to establish any pattern of organisation). Some points may occasionally come across to the reader but the content is largely irrelevant. The writer's poor control of grammar and structure results in errors that obscure meaning in many parts of the essay. Vocabulary is very limited.

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