

The Experiences of ESL Workplace Writers and their Writing Literacy

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The inability of new workers to perform efficiently at their L2 writing tasks results in complaints amongst employers. L2 workplace writing literacy encompasses the practices that conform the nature of the organisation. This study aims to explore the experiences of the L2 workplace writers to arrive at an understanding of the writers' backgrounds and their workplace writing literacy. The understanding shows the skills deficits that graduates might have. The empirical phenomenological approach was used for exploration. Seven millennial generation workers experiences were gathered by using two-phase in-depth interviews and self-portraits methods of data collection. Their responses were analysed based on the van Kaam's seven-step systematic thematic analysis. It was found that L2 writers' backgrounds were explained through their L2 proficiency, which shows that they had a good foundation in the language and confidence in using the language for that purpose. In terms of workplace literacy, their experiences have revealed the manifestation of transitions that the participants made through their engagement with the situated activities. The transition is shown by the improvement in the L2 and written tasks through gradual learning on-the-job. Thus, the participants possess good ESL foundation to perform their tasks and established their workplace literacy in the transition they made through on-the-job learning. It implies that workplace writing literacy in ESL education focuses on learning through situated activities writing. Future work should examine the relationship between language proficiency and situated learning dimensions in workplace literacy studies.

Key words: *workplace writing, literacy, dynamic writer, millennial writer, ESL writing, situated activity.*

Introduction

Workplace communication

Today's advanced global communication calls for a view of workplace communication reality. Workplace reality is constructed by the circumstances and its community that are under pressure for improvement. The improvement is inevitable to endure the growing international challenges. An ideal 21st century work organisation largely relies on valuable workforces who are capable of creating advantages and meeting the communicative standards of an organisation (Knoch et al., 2016; Munene, & Nyaribo, 2013). Writing in English as a second language is one of the crucial communication skills in the workplace (Yusuf, Yunus & Embi, 2018). Workplace writing literacy crafts distinctive workplace cultures which involve the workforces. A workforce creates a sense of identity through their participation in workplace literacy. Literacy serves as a context of the workplace, which then evolves a workforce identity and behaviour (Swart, 2018). Becoming workplace writing literate means recognising the purpose and value of the functional writing practices in a particular workplace context. A workforce then can establish a writer identity of being able to produce functional workplace texts (Swart, 2018).

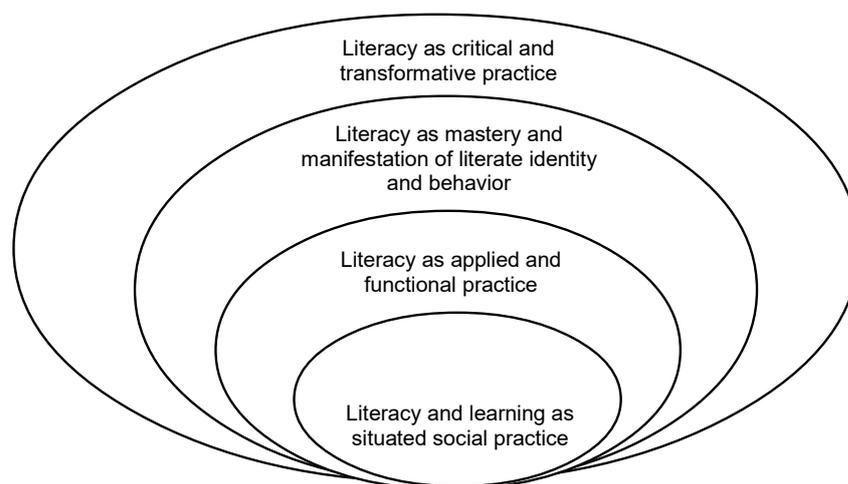
Although workplace writing literacy is essential, new writers at the workplace show English as a Second Language (ESL) writing skill deficits. The problem that exists among the newly hired workforce becomes employers' most common dissatisfaction. In comparison with other issues, the highest problem faced by employers in hiring graduates (55.8%) is poor communication skills (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012). New workforces were found to grapple with the existing writing skills they possess (Kohn, 2015). Prior research showed tasks that involve English writing skills performed the worst among the workplace communication requirements (Rajprasit, Pratoomrat & Wang, 2015). In times of constant economic revolution, employers favour workforces who are able to work effectively. Skill deficiencies such as, writing meeting minutes, emails, letters and reports cause inconveniences. For both organisation and employees, the skill deficit creates issues, for instance: administrative delays, extensive revision, loss of time, hamper self-development and organisations may lose their business opportunities (Knoch et al., 2016). Nevertheless, tertiary education is expected to produce future-proof graduates who are equipped with 21st century career skills and proficient in language skills (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2018). In other words, more research is needed to understand the real literacy required for work and, the employees or the workplace writers within the workplace context.

Workplace Writing Literacy

Workplace literacy is confined to the context of the workplace. It has a key role in workplace changes as the requirements change due to the changing nature of work and management.

The changing nature has enormous implications for literacy, whether it requires higher skills or continuous improvement (Jackson, 2000). Several studies suggest that literacy development in tertiary education is situated and conceptualised in sociocultural contexts. According to this theoretical lens, literacy progresses as workers are increasingly capable of using a particular workplace literacy functionally, and it happens through their engagement in the practices (Swart, 2018). Through this perspective of literacy as situated in practice and socially construed, particular layers of capabilities manifest a literate identity. According to Swart (2018), a literate identity is established through four premises, as depicted in Figure 1. The workplace literate identity, that is manifested by the transformation of behaviour reaches its ultimate goal as the individual is capable of using critical literacy. As a result, it transforms the individual into a working and thinking human that also heightens a graduate's employability. At the early stage, literacy is observable in events or situated in social practices. Among the activities are interactions between organisations (Swart, 2018). At this stage, literacy is also regarded as being instrumental or material. The material entails institutional histories which are bound to its ideologies. Also, the notion of being workplace literate from the socially constructed lens highlights the set of values, practices or functions and the behaviours that writers share with co-workers within their organisation (Machili, 2014; Swart, 2018). Next, functional literacy practice includes the incorporation of technology to produce texts. Being literate at this stage means the individual can understand, create, interpret and communicate to meet the purpose of their work (Said et al., 2013, Yunus et al., 2012a, Yunus et al, 2012b, Yunus, 2018).

Figure 1. Workplace literacy conceptual map (Swart, 2018)



The next concept of workplace literacy, the manifestation of literate behaviour works beyond functional engagement in workplace practices. This concept encompasses literate identity or the capability of using literacy critically as to meet the desired standard. However, variations

within the boundaries of one profession or sector allegedly appear. The differences are triggered by some factors that include situational, local contexts and spatial exigencies (Machili, 2014). Apart from viewing workplace literacy through the sociocultural context, practitioners place huge importance on linking job tasks or functional contexts to workplace literacy.

Similarly, the concepts of social practice, learning and transformation were heavily associated in the studies on the second language (L2) workplace writing practices. Dias et al. (2011), for instance, have the same concepts of defining ESL workplace literacy. The perspective of socially constructed practice is explained concerning the complexity of social motive of workplace writing, and the transformative concept, which is explained as a transition from university writing to on-the-job writing. Thus, workplace literacy in the context of the study is confined in the complexity workplace writing that is manifested by its social practice along with the transitions that writers make through their tertiary education to their on-the-job experiences.

L2 Workplace Writers

There is a need for ESL writers at the workplace to organise English written discourse into their standard workplace practices. Previous studies have examined how writers acquire the structures they portray in their written tasks (Salehi & Yunus, 2012). The studies rationalised the patterns of ESL texts produced in terms of the writer's educational backgrounds. Manchon and Matsuda (2016), for example, suggested that the writer's educational backgrounds have some impact on L2 writing structures. However, Matsuda (1997); and Silva and Matsuda (2010) also suggested that other factors also manifest a writer's background. The Dynamic Model of L2 Writing as developed by Matsuda (1997) indicated that along with education, writer's language (includes dialect) and culture (includes socioeconomic status) underlies backgrounds. The concept of dynamic is expanded from a static pedagogical perspective of L2 writing. It moves away from the assumption that a writer is a text production machine because of the three qualities described above (education, culture and linguistics) that encompass a writer's background. These three elements are the most salient constituents in backgrounds. A writer's background is the only part of these three features in the dynamic model of L2 writing that interrelate in a particular writing situation.

In the present study, L2 workplace writers are among the millennial generation workforce. In terms of education, the millennials are associated with the word 'achieving'. Howe and Strauss (2007) identified their achieving trait to explain their higher desire and standards that influence the education reform. This generation is more focused on meeting their high expectations and achievement relating to education (Emeagwali, 2011). Millennials favour

learning or being taught in a manner that is comprehensive to them. They often find new learning opportunities in their pursuit to excel at all their goals (Smith & Nichols, 2015). Hence, this study set out with two goals: (a) to identify the workplace ESL writer's backgrounds; and (b) to describe the ESL workplace writing literacy.

Method

Research Design

The research design used in this study is empirical phenomenology. This approach requires the participants to recollect their lived-experiences. It is to ensure disclosure of the essence of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A two-tiered method of locating descriptions from the participants, as recommended by Giorgi (1997) was employed. The method allowed a context to exist and followed by the generation of meaning (Bevan, 2014; Giorgi, 2008).

Data from a two-phase in-depth interview were then compared with the data gained from self-portrait descriptions. The data of the study were elicited from both verbal and visual. In-depth interviews of the study encompass the exploration on (1) their recollection of lived-experiences of performing L2 workplace writing, and (2) life-history which is meant to create a context of their experiences and disclosure of their backgrounds. On the other hand, the self-portrait description was used by asking the participants to sketch themselves in any workplace writing task situation. This approach helped to generate more exploration on the phenomenon, sustain supplementary data that are not covered during interviews. Throughout the semi-structured interviews, pre-determined questions wandered to maintain a continuation of particular responses. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using ATLAS ti 8. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality.

The systematic thematic analysis, as suggested by Moustakas (1994), or the modified thematic analysis model by van Kaam, was used to analyse the data. The seven-step process used to guide the phenomenological data includes the discovery of patterns and themes, data reduction, imaginative variation (or construction of meaningful categories) and finally the synthesis of the meaning and essence of the data.

Previous qualitative exploration, for example, Ang, Embi and Yunus (2016); and Leung (2015) are heedful on the notion of triangulation in qualitative paradigm. They suggested the urgency to delineate triangulation from a qualitative research's perspective. In the present study, the data triangulation (time and different sources) was used to determine the congruence of the event under investigation across time and various data sources. As said, to consider data source triangulation, interviews were conducted in two-phases that required a long engagement with the participants. This triangulation was carried out as suggested by Giorgi (1997), and two types of data elicitation were employed.

Participants

Participants selected for the studies are from the millennial generation or those who were born between the years of 1982 and 2004. This particular group of workplace writers were selected due to their domination in the workforce. They have caused a significant transition in the generational composition of the workforce (Bartek, 2014). It is essential to understand them because they possess an avidly different view on communication (Myers, & Sadaghiani, 2010). They were selected by considering a set of criteria namely: performing on-the-job writing in English, holding a degree, and working within the same services sector for at least five years. The possibility is that if an individual has worked for more than five years then they have comprehended their work culture (Merriam, 2009).

A phenomenological inquiry can include five to 25 interview participants who have the lived experience of the event under investigation (Polkinghorne, 1989; Yin, 2015). As illustrated in Table 1, seven participants work in four different services sectors in Malaysia. They are from communication, manufacturing, government services, power and utility, and finance. At their workplace, six of the participants write for their career and one, Amelia writes as her career is as a journalist.

Table 1: The participants involved in this study

No. of participants	Type of services/workplace	Pseudonym	Gender	Age
1	Manufacturing	Alice	F	33
3	Government services	Beth, Creole, Dan	F, F, M	31, 31, 32
1	Power and utility	Ez	M	29
1	Finance	Faz	M	30
1	Communication	Gee	F	29

Results

a. Workplace writer's background

The findings revealed one of the features that encompasses L2 writers' backgrounds, their ESL proficiency and workplace values. The millennial L2 writers believed that their English is relatively good and that their command of English is reliable for their job purposes. They described this was due to the frequent use of English in everyday life. Ez shared that using English was not an issue for him as he said "*English, I think I am used to using English. So, it is not really a problem for me*" (Ez/iv). Consequently, the self-portrait descriptions show that they communicated the affective aspect when describing their ESL proficiency. The feelings

were caused by the challenges and the nature of the L2 tasks. Apart from the nature of tasks assigned, colleagues were among the reasons, as shared by Faz *“I feel the pressure when using English with my colleagues”* (Faz_sp). However, the colleagues’ feedback made them feel their skills in using ESL was appreciated. Sophea communicated her contentment in her L2 skills as she said, *“feel appreciated being asked because it shows that my colleagues and superiors have faith and believe in my command of the English language”* (Beth_sp).

The participants were found to place intrinsic values to L2 writing tasks. When they encountered challenges to execute a job, they used the value to get by the situations. They also believed that the difficulties were inevitable. As millennials, they sometimes felt that the tasks assigned were tedious. However, they then found the values in the writing tasks itself. Alice, Creole, Dan and Ez, for instance, found themselves gradually engaged in a task as a result of the satisfaction and the intangible rewards they gained. For Dan, the satisfaction came from fulfilling his duty towards his job, as he noted, *“we have to deal with it even though, even though, whether we like or not”* (Dan/iv). Meanwhile, Ez found himself drawn to tasks for intangible rewards in work itself. It is the information underlying the tasks as he described, *“but when you found out the informative elements, you would still be drawn to that”* (Ez/iv). Similarly, the intrinsic work value influences Creole to fulfil her L2 tasks. She supposed it offered her self-development. She shared, *“it helps you to see a different perspective of how people experience or see things”* (Creole/iv).

b. ESL workplace writing literacy

This part of the findings partially depicts workplace writing literacy or the transitions that the participants make since their employment. The participants have experienced learning that transpired from their engagement in on-the-job writing. Learning through or at work was recalled by all of the informants regardless of their organisation. Alice, Dan, and Gee defined learning at work as improvements in their writing to suit job purposes. Improvement was seen in their English skills, not just for both job and life purposes. Their confidence level increased as a result of this improvement in L2. Alice also noted the transition through learning as she shared, *“it helps me to improve my English, and besides that, it also helps me you know, writing”* (Alice/iv). Dan said that learning at work shows in his continuous improvement, *“learning process, and then from time-to-time, there is continuous improvement”* (Dan/iv). Likewise, Ez mentioned about improvement as a result of engagement in the practice, especially on his L2 skills. He shared, *“I suppose this helps me improves my English not just for myself but the job”* (Ez/iv). The same transition in terms of learning that improves Beth’s and Gee’s workplace literacy. They uttered, *“yes we learned, and then we improve for our job”* (Beth/iv) and *“it’s a process of learning. When I came in into my current job, I can’t use what I had previously because it’s such a different environment. So, a way of building myself through writing it”* (Gee/iv).

Moreover, transitions as part of workplace literacy take place through their participation in training and social interaction. The participants shared that training was conducted, whether internally or outside their workplace. As noted by Faz, “*we have such trainings conducted here (workplace)*” (Faz/iv). The participants recalled about the structured learnings that the management organised. As noted by Faz “*the courses prepared, scheduled by the corporate training division*” (Faz/iv). Beth regarded training that was specifically organised for writing short courses. It took place for a day or two, as she explained, “*HR people do is like create these courses, short courses a day or two courses of writing*” (Beth/iv). Thus, participation in the tasks, social interaction or planned learning through training are the learning that manifests their L2 workplace writing literacy. Transitions that are made through learning to write at work are associated with improvements, processes, and adjustments to the meet the needs of the workplace writing in English.

Discussion

The ESL workplace writers' backgrounds show through the way they performed the instructed tasks. The situations of workplace writing in L2 that they encountered, exposed their L2 proficiency and attitudes towards the tasks and ESL. The participants portrayed their L2 proficiency through their engagement in tasks. They also associated their level of proficiency with some affective aspects. For instance, they initially had anxiety for the tasks, but it was turned into positive feelings (happy). They then developed a sense of confidence in their writing skills as they believed in their good foundation in the language. This study supports evidence from previous observations, which found that the young generation has positive attitudes towards ESL (e. g. Kajan, & Shah, 2019). This kind of writer retains a high-level L2 writing ability (Leki, Cumming & Silva, 2009). This finding is also maintained by Howe and Strauss' psychological traits, in which the millennial generation are regarded as confident individuals. To our knowledge, the writer's background encompasses their ESL proficiency. This finding suggests that they possess good ESL foundations to enable them to fulfil their ESL workplace writing tasks. Apart from that, they have intrinsic values that lie in ESL writing tasks. This value spurs their willingness to fulfil their tasks.

The results of the exploration of workplace writing literacy concludes that learning constituted in a large part of the workers' transitions. The participants experienced learning through social interaction, through the actions: first-hand experience and participation in training. The findings are best explained from the perspectives of Lave and Wenger (1991)'s situated learning. Workers learning is called situated experience and occurs as a result of constant engagement with the practices. As a result of learning through engagement, their L2 writing skills were enhanced. This finding is consistent with the impact of engagement in tasks to the amount of transferred written linguistic knowledge in Zhang (2019). The present



study shows that the participants experienced literacy or transition in a combination of everyday activities (situated tasks) and social interactions. They also established workplace literacy through a gradual transition enabled by on-the-job learning. The learning took place as they engaged in the tasks.

It is therefore recommended that workplace writing literacy in ESL education focuses on learning the language and writing skills through situated activities. These kinds of activities enhance learners' willingness to participate and learn about tasks. They also get to realise that a good foundation in language is pertinent for that purpose. In further work, investigating these three dimensions of workplace writing experiences; writer's ESL proficiency, work values and learning on-the-job might prove necessary. This study believes that apart from exploring the dimensions, future research should look for their effectiveness and relationships in establishing workplace literacy. The research could also explore the transitional role in transforming novice workers into experience workers.

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