English-as-an-Additional-Language Employees' Perspectives on Writing in the Workplace

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Abstract

This article presents study results on workplace writing from English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) employees' perspectives, and shares findings about how educational institutions in British Columbia can better prepare EAL students to write in the workplace. In post-secondary academic writing, content rather than writing accuracy is often emphasized, yet most employers consider writing accuracy important as it reflects a company's image (Hu & Hoare, 2017), and how EAL employees perceive their writing preparedness, workplace writing accuracy, and language challenges remains unexplored. Thus, we inquired: 1) How do EAL employees graduated from English-speaking universities and working in English-medium environments perceive workplace writing accuracy? 2) To what extent are they prepared for workplace writing? 3) What writing challenges do they encounter? 4) What do they think universities can do to better prepare EAL students for workplace writing? The study employed qualitative interviews with nine EAL employees who graduated from British Columbia universities and were working at English-medium companies in Canada. Data analysis suggests that the participants highly valued writing accuracy; however, their education did not prepare them adequately. In addition, the participants suggested that universities offer more communication, business, and professional writing courses; enhance support services; invite employers and EAL employees as guest speakers; and incorporate real-life scenarios in the curriculum.

Introduction

> When you are working, they [employers] expect you to know everything. They don't want to teach you how to write an email. For a student, you should know all the basic stuff before you leave for a job. They expect it. (Participant I)

After English–as-an additional-language (EAL) students finish university, one of their first tasks is to seek employment in the workforce using their newfound skills. This employment can be in any number of industry areas such as finance, information technology (IT), trades, nursing, business management, and general retail. However, their ability to obtain employment and career advancement in English-medium institutions can be related to their ability to write in English. Many employers find writing critical for the prospective employee, stating sentiments such as "In most cases, writing ability could be your ticket in or it could be your ticket out" (ESL Writer, 2015). Bovee, Thill, and Scribner (2020) have highlighted communication as the most important business skill and "far and away the most commonly mentioned skill set" (p. 31) when employers look to hire employees. The more people advance in careers, the more important communication skills are than technical background (Lannon, Gurak, Klepp, & Kelly, 2021). Furthermore, the ability of graduates to write correctly and clearly can have a direct impact on

employers' perceptions of employees, especially EAL speakers, who are often believed to have communication deficiencies (Marshall, 2009). Among other employer concerns, grammatical and mechanical errors can not only cause misunderstanding, but make the writer appear unprofessional (Ewald, 2017), and by extension, make the represented firm appear unprofessional (Hu & Hoare, 2017).

Despite the importance of English communication in the workplace and the significance of second language (L2) employees for the British Columbia labour force (British Columbia, 2019), few studies have investigated the communication skills of EAL speakers in the workplace, especially written communication.

Technical Communication

Technical writing is very important for business communication as it is used to fulfil many job responsibilities such as internal communications including memos, emails, and reports, and external communications directed to clients and customers. Ewald (2017) stated "Technical writing is a simple, stripped-down tool designed to get the job done, and that's to convey information to people who need it. It's not meant to be fancy. It's meant to be clear and effective" (p. 3). The clearer the writing is, the better it is perceived, and many EAL students are expected to have the same ability to communicate in writing as native-English speakers (Hu & Hoare, 2017). Furthermore, businesses often do not offer training in their specific vernacular or methods of communication, expecting their employees to already have the skills needed.

Ewald (2017) described four major attributes of technical writing. Technical writing is clear, complete, concise, and accessible. Being clear means the writing must be easily understood. Being complete means providing all the information needed to understand the situation. Concision means being as brief as possible. Finally, technical writing must be accessible, namely, organized and formatted to enable the reader to find specific information quickly. This clear, concise, and stripped-down writing is often at odds with what EAL students are used to, which is descriptive or research essays that allow for added details or complicated and narrative language created for peers. As Lannon et al. (2021) have pointed out, "When novice technical writers first encounter the task of producing scientific, technical, or business documents, they often rely on the strategies they've used to create essays or personal documents" (n.p.). These strategies are often incorrect and are not capable of creating the specialised language and format that technical documentation requires. Thus, while EAL students are taught academic essentials in their courses such as grammar and vocabulary, they often have trouble making the switch to the constraints of technical writing.

Canadian Language Benchmark Policies towards EAL in the Workplace

By describing Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB), we endeavour to provide a context where basic and more advanced business communication can occur. The CLB provides a benchmark for teachers, EAL students, and workplaces that describes different levels of listening, speaking, writing, and reading competency in English. These benchmarks provide a set of descriptions to determine a language user's ability to communicate and understand in a general setting. It ranges from CLB 1, which indicates initial basic language ability, to CLB 12, which marks language

ability as fluent advanced. We look specifically at written communication with regards to workplace standards and relate them to CLB levels.

Business and professional written communication starts at CLB level 3 wherein the writer is able to "write simple, short business or service messages" (Gauthier, 2019, p. 3). At CLB 11, the writer can "write business or service correspondence for a broad range of purposes and for external use; formal business reports, requests for proposals and formal proposals; and effective, stylistically complex text" (Gauthier, 2019, p. 7). A writer at CLB 12 can "write highly specialized, complex formal correspondence and documents; and, effective and stylistically polished texts to inform, convince and persuade others" (Gauthier, 2019, p. 7). The descriptions of these last two levels match exactly what employers see in ideal employees as the former expect efficiency, professionalism, and competence and want the written image of the company to be perfect (Beason, 2001; Bovee et al., 2020; Ewald, 2017; Hu & Hoare, 2017; Lannon et al., 2021). Yet, most EAL graduates will find it hard to meet these standards upon completing undergraduate, or even Master's, studies.

Literature Review

Among the small number of studies on workplace communication of EAL speakers, Derwing and Munro (2009) used experiments to find out how native-English speakers in a petrochemical company in Alberta, Canada perceived the oral communication of EAL immigrant colleagues whose first language (L1) was Slavic or Mandarin. The participants listened to paired samples and offered opinions on their preferences. The study found that comprehensibility is more important than accentedness for successful communication. For example, one can "speak with a strong accent yet be highly intelligible and comprehensible" (p. 197). The study also noted that many EAL professionals have not developed satisfactory oral language skills upon completing English instruction in Canada and that there should be more emphasis on oral communication skills such as fluency and pronunciation in EAL and Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs. Acknowledging there are few studies on workplace communication between native English and EAL speakers, Derwing and Munro (2009) called for more research on such issues as they are significant not only for applied linguistics but also for the Canadian labour force and economy.

The Study of Employer Perspectives on EAL Employees' Writing

This paper builds upon a previous study by Hu and Hoare (2017) which explored employer perspectives on EAL employees' writing. Research has revealed that many university EAL students do not consider writing accuracy important and therefore, are not motivated to improve writing because, in academic disciplines, professors often emphasize content over language accuracy (e.g., Gimenez, 2009; Hirvela, 2011; Hoare & Hu, 2015; Hu, 2000, 2010; Hyland, 2013; Ortega, 2011). To help raise the consciousness of language accuracy and clarity among university faculty and EAL students, Ferris (2011) called for research to explore the views of prospective employers on inaccurate and unclear writing of EAL employees. In response to the call, Hu and Hoare (2017) examined the perspectives of employers in Western Canada on workplace writing of their EAL employees. In particular, the study inquired: 1) What are the expectations of employers regarding accuracy and clarity in the writing of EAL employees?

2) What language problems do EAL employees have in work-related writing? 3) How might writing problems affect career opportunities and successes of EAL employees? Data were collected through individual qualitative interviews with ten participants recruited from one small city and one metropolitan area. The participants were typically company managers or other executives, representing tourism, banking, high-tech, medical service, education counselling, and other fields that tended to have a high percentage of EAL employees. The data were analyzed in two approaches, one to seek answers to the research questions and the other, a thematic approach, to identify themes or recurrent patterns of response (Crocker et al, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). The major findings of the study include the following:

1   The employers mostly maintain the same writing standards for EAL employees as for native English speakers.
2   Resumes containing inaccurate or unclear writing often are discarded during screening.
3   EAL employees are expected to write accurate and standard English in communication with the external world since errors and unclear writing may reflect negatively on the *image* of the company as well as the writer, not only linguistically but also professionally. So, while employers expect one standard of writing, academia provides another. Beason (2001) used image theory to illuminate the "disparity between employer expectations and research on faculty feedback and practices in L2 disciplinary writing" (p. 10).
4   For EAL employees whose technical or specific skills are valued over language proficiency, minor language errors are often tolerated in internal communication (e.g., emails) as long as the language is comprehensible and results in no undesirable consequence.
5   Language problems contributing to workplace writing inaccuracy are related to grammar, vocabulary, word order, clarity, idiomatic expressions, and professional writing style among other concerns.
6   EAL employees are generally expected to complete writing tasks with minimal assistance from colleagues.
7   EAL employees who write inaccurate or unclear English may have difficulty finding certain employment, be dismissed, be offered a learning plan, have limited advancement opportunities, and be assigned roles dealing with internal colleagues only or requiring limited language skills. Thus, to properly prepare university EAL students for working in English-medium environments, instructors need to provide feedback and treatment for EAL students' writing problems. For example, composition courses should include editing skills.
8   A disconnect exists between the academic and professional worlds in most fields concerning EAL writing accuracy and clarity.

Since Hu and Hoare (2017) focused on the perspectives of *employers* on EAL employee writing, they call for further research on the perspectives of EAL *employees* who were former EAL students regarding their "writing preparedness for and writing challenges at the workplace" (p. 14).

Research Questions

Despite research conducted in previous studies (e.g., Beason, 2001; Hairston, 1981; Hu & Hoare, 2017), few have explored how EAL university graduates perceive the importance of writing accurately and clearly in the workplace or examined their perceptions of the institutions that

trained them to write in English. The current study represents an extension of a previous study of employers' perspectives on EAL employee writing in the workplace (Hu & Hoare, 2017) and reports on EAL employees' perceptions on writing in the workplace. This research is critical because it may impact EAL students and university faculty. Currently, as mentioned earlier, many of these students have no interest in improving writing accuracy (Ferris, 2002, 2011; Hu, 2010), tend to lack confidence in writing competence, and rely too much on institutional and tutor support; furthermore, academic faculty often choose to ignore language accuracy while focusing on content (Hoare & Hu, 2015; Hu, 2010; Hyland, 2013).

The goal of this study is to provide a different perspective on workplace writing and to raise university faculty's and EAL students' awareness of the importance of writing proficiency. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do EAL employees graduated from English-speaking post-secondary institutions perceive English writing accuracy for the workplace?
2. To what extent are they prepared for writing in English in the workplace?
3. What writing tasks and challenges do they encounter in the workplace?
4. How do they think universities can better prepare EAL students for writing in the workplace?

Defining Key Terms

As in Hu and Hoare (2017), *work-related writing* in this study refers to writing for work-related purposes, consisting of a phrase or sentence but typically comprised of multiple sentences in one or more paragraphs. Examples are letters, emails, memos, service orders, manuals, and work-related reports. W*orkplace correspondence* is a type of work-related writing and includes emails, letters, text messages, newsletters, and memos.

Language problems are those that affect one or more dimensions of language in communication. The major dimensions (see Fig. 1 next page) are grammatical accuracy, meaning clarity, and contextual appropriateness of a language unit such as a phrase, sentence, paragraph, or article (see Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). The shared intersection in Fig. 1 refers to the same language unit which may exhibit different meanings in different domains. For example, in the sentence "It's OK." the grammar is correct, while the meaning may or may not be clear depending on the meaning of "it." However, the sentence is acceptable in informal writing but generally not appropriate in formal writing. The language problems include, but are not limited to, those in the following categories: grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, upper and lower cases, and professional writing style.

Language accuracy typically indicates language free of grammatical and mechanical errors. *Language proficiency* refers to the degree a person has mastered the receptive (i.e., listening and reading) and productive (i.e., speaking and writing) skills of a language. Language accuracy constitutes part of language proficiency, especially in productive skills. *Professional writing style* means using profession-specific terminology and writing clearly and concisely without using contracted forms (e.g., they'll), colloquial expressions, or choppy sentences (i.e., two or more sentences in a row with less than 10 words in each) (see Hu, 2011).
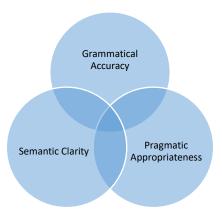
Figure 1. Dimensions of language problems

Study Methodology

Semi-Structured In-Depth Qualitative Interviews

Like the previous study on employer perspectives on the writing problems of EAL employees (Hu & Hoare, 2017), this study employed semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews to uncover the perspectives of EAL employees on their writing preparedness and challenges for the workplace (Creswell, 1998; Crocker et al., 2014; Gonzales, 2018; Hu, 2009; Newton, 2010; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). As the writing preparedness and challenges were personal for each research participant, they were highly sensitive and confidential. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) observed that "interviews are particularly appropriate when the information to be shared is sensitive or confidential" (p. 358). Furthermore, writing in the workplace is complex because it involves not only grammatical and mechanical accuracy but more importantly, semantic clarity and pragmatic appropriateness (Hu & Hoare, 2017). The complexity is compounded by the variety of jobs and writing responsibilities of the research participants in different positions (see participant profiles below). In-depth qualitative interviews were a suitable approach as they can generate rich data and in-depth insights into complex issues (Hu, 2009; Hu & Hoare, 2017; Newton, 2010). Finally, we adopted semi-structured interviews, namely, interviews with a prepared guide because the guide can enable efficient use of the interview time and allow a degree of comparability across the participants (see the appendix for the interview guide) (Gonzales, 2018). However, the open-ended nature of the interviews also means that researchers have the option to pursue interesting and meaningful issues that emerge during the interview (Gonzales, 2018). As Savin-Baden and Major (2013) suggested, this was especially important as we had only one interview opportunity with each participant since they were very busy and some were working in other cities of Canada (see Hu & Hoare, 2017).

Participants

A total of nine participants were recruited from a diverse set of industries ranging from banking to retail, and their work experience ranged from half a year to eight years. The diversity ensured that a wide range of responses were received. Eight of them originally came from Asian countries and one was from Argentina. Their ages ranged from 25 to 35, with one outlier being 51. All but one had graduated from an institution in British Columbia with either a Master's or

Bachelor's degree; the outlier had graduated from an institution in British Columbia with a Care Aid Certificate. All but one had taken courses in an EAL program; the outlier had instead taken four undergraduate English courses (see Table 1 for participant profiles).

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Participants	Business and Position	Gender	Length of Employment	Age	Country/ Region of Origin	EAL Courses Completed	Degrees Earned
A	Bank, Advisor	Male	2 Years	27	South Korea	Levels 2-5	BBA-HR
B	Retail, Cellphone Manager	Male	2.5 Years	29	China	Levels 3-5	BBA
C	Import-Export, Credit Coordinator	Female	11 Months	35	Argentina	Levels 4-5	MBA
D	Retail Store, Assistant Manager	Female	1.5 Years	28	China	Levels 3-5	M.Ed.
E	Bank, Financial Services Manager	Male	3 Years	30	China	Levels 3-5	M.Ed. BBA
F	Nursing, Senior Care Aide	Female	2.5 Years	51	China	Levels 3-5	Care Aide Cert.
G	Retail, Manager/Owner	Male	7 Years	30	China	Levels 4-5	BBA
H	Animal Care Attendant	Female	8 Years	33	Taiwan	Levels 4-5	MBA
I	IT, Web Developer	Male	0.5 Years	25	Pakistan	4 Undergraduate English Courses	BS

Note. Level 1 is the lowest and Level 5 is the highest of the EAL courses at the institution in question.

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants were initially sent an invitation to participate in the study. Once they accepted the invitation, they were emailed an interview guide to prepare them for the study. From August 2015 to February 2016, seven of the participants were interviewed individually by the authors face-to-face in the former's offices or a classroom at the latter's institution. Two who were working in another city were interviewed individually by phone. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with their permission. The interview questions were designed to elicit responses on the participants' writing ability, error awareness, EAL training opportunities and resources in the workplace, and suggestions for educational institutions in British Columbia.

It is worth noting that while the last interview question asked for suggestions for the study itself, almost all the participants answered by using the opportunity to provide further suggestions about how universities could better prepare EAL students' writing skills for the

workplace. They did so after having answered a previous question specifically designed for this purpose.

During the interview, the second author transcribed simultaneously on a laptop computer with the help of the interview guide and, afterwards, checked the transcription against the audio-recording. While interviewing, the first author also made notes on a hard copy of the interview guide and checked the transcription with the notes. Since the transcripts were double-checked, they were supposed to be accurate and reliable. As the participants were busy and no honorarium was available, we did not attempt member checking.

We conducted the data analysis using a thematic approach, also known as the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). In this approach, we read the interview transcripts repeatedly, performed constant comparison of ideas (Crocker et al., 2014), and identified themes or recurrent patterns of response (Gonzales, 2018; Hu, 2000). The themes identified included workplace writing tasks, writing challenges, workplace writing resources, institutional English writing, and suggestions for academia. These themes are presented in detail in the following section.

Research Findings

This section presents the themes identified through thematic analysis of the interview data.

Workplace Writing Tasks

The study participants were required to complete a variety of writing tasks depending on their specific jobs. For example, a participant in the banking industry was required to write internal and external emails, provide account summaries, and complete credit and loan applications on behalf of clients and companies. The participants working in the retail industry mentioned writing meeting minutes; drafting sales summaries; writing reports to supervisors, and creating purchase, production, and sales orders. Those participants working in health care, specifically nursing and animal care, described writing detailed patient descriptions, daily notes, and emails to colleagues and customers. All the participants used emails in their regular communications with customers, clients, and the public, and internally with colleagues and supervisors.

Writing Challenges

The needs and challenges faced by EAL employees are diverse, but in the context of this study, factors such as work environment, demographics, employment experience, and time out of educational institutions were seen as a direct influence (Marshall, 2009). Common challenges included difficulty with spelling when writing on paper, unfamiliar technical vocabulary, grammar, clear expressions, and professional writing style. These challenges arose from a lack of education on these specific subjects at their previous educational institutions and a lack of training in the workplace.

The participants found that job-specific vocabulary was required to write in a professional manner, and this vocabulary had not been taught at their educational institutions.

Grammar difficulties included those involving forms and structures such as verb tenses and prepositions. Furthermore, the quality expectations for writing emails to supervisors and external recipients were rated at the same level as that for native-English speaking employees. As Participant D commented, "they have the same expectations for me. It's the same as Canadians. The expectations in writing are equally high." This finding echoes the previous study on employer perspectives on EAL employee writing (Hu & Hoare, 2017).

Several participants noted that at the start of their job, they did not know how to write professional emails. For example, one participant stated that emails in the professional workplace were far different from the writing he had previously encountered: "When I start to work, writing emails and the paper writing were totally different" (Participant G). Similarly, in response to our question regarding writing challenges, Participant E, a bank manager, expressed frustrations about emails, specifically how to communicate clearly with adequate details.

Along with challenges in vocabulary and grammar, the participants faced issues with clear and concise writing and professional writing style (Ewald, 2017). Nearly all the participants indicated that the ability to write in a clear, concise, and professional manner was critical and that employers assumed that employees already knew how to do so. Participant I elucidated:

> When you are working, they expect you to know everything. They don't want to teach you how to write or do an email. For a student, you should have to know all the basic stuff before you leave for a job. They expect it.

While, for non-critical internal communications, minor writing errors were sometimes tolerated, when asked about the necessity of accurate and clear writing, the participants emphasized that such writing was critical to their jobs; it was expected in all written communications both internally and externally. Failure to do so could have consequences; these could range from mere embarrassment in front of employers and clients to life-threatening in health care situations. One participant stated: "That's very important for dealing with contractors and supervisors. You need to make them understand. If the other person doesn't understand, they might take it another way and that could be disastrous" (Participant I). Another participant reiterated:

> Because whatever the resident says, if we are not clear [in writing], the nurse doesn't know and then the doctor doesn't know. They [nurses and doctors] can get confused or misinformed. And then they [residents] might not be able to get the care they need; maybe not able to catch the best time for the best medical help. It could be very dangerous for the patients. High consequences. (Participant F)

Workplace Writing Resources

When queried about their access to professional development opportunities, specifically writing resources, all the participants reported that their workplaces did not offer any language or writing development. While the workplaces offered workshops such as job skill development and management training, they appeared to expect non-native English speakers to operate at the same level as their Canadian English-speaking employees in terms of language proficiency (see

above). To deal with the writing challenges and lack of workplace writing resources, the participants utilized various strategies such as asking colleagues, using Internet resources, Googling, and proofreading multiple times. As Participant H observed, "I ask friends and colleagues to proofread…. I use Google to search for templates. Internet is the first go-to source." Hu and Hoare (2017) reported that some employers paid for programs to improve their employees' language skills, but most employers described collegial aid for the EAL employees as a strategy instead. If a company has a significant number of EAL employees who need language development, Brooks (2009) recommended that workplaces provide English language coaches, bilingual writing materials, classes, and seminars for the employees to learn workplace vocabulary and writing in the workplace. These add-ons to workplace language learning could alleviate the issues reported by the participants related to the lack of language resources and give EAL employees an avenue to learn the language that they need to succeed.

Institutional English Writing

When asked about how their educational institutions prepared them for the workplace, there appeared to be a consensus among the participants. They indicated that while they were taught the basics of the English language, it was routinely insufficient. They did not receive enough practice in terms of workplace writing; however, weekly journals and vocabulary for some course topics were beneficial. They suggested that workplace writing skills were de-emphasised at the educational institution in favour of English for academic purposes, including a reliance on textbooks that had little or nothing to do with the workplace. One participant indicated that he learned more in a workplace setting than in a classroom. "I didn't learn much from [the institution]. It's more the working environment that helped me" (Participant B). One reason was that as a store manager, he was constantly exposed to English and work-specific vocabulary and grammar whereas in the university setting, the EAL emphasis is usually on English for academic purposes.

Suggestions for Academia to Improve EAL Student Writing

When asked about what teachers and educational institutions in British Columbia could do to better prepare EAL students to write in the workplace, the participants had several valuable suggestions. One was for the university to offer more business, technical, and professional writing courses that would benefit EAL graduates in the workplace. As Participant H explained, "For four years we write lots of papers. When you got to the workplace, it's totally different when writing memos or emails. I have to write reference or recruitment letters, but I was never taught how." Thus, she suggested "more English courses for different academic areas and more preparation for workplace writing, e.g., proposals, recruitment letters." She also thought that a "professional workplace-writing course should be in the Bachelor's or the Diploma program. [EAL] is still too broad for the professional writing. It [EAL] should focus on the grammar and the basics." Similarly, the student participants in Hu (2000) also made requests for discipline-specific English.

Furthermore, the participants in this study expressed a need for the institution to prepare them for the real working world by incorporating real-life examples and inviting employers and recent EAL graduates as guest speakers. As Participant I advised, "for some programs you could

invite the employers [as guest speakers] …What are you looking for in a student [i.e., employee candidate], talk about skill expectations including writing skills. They [university programs] can base their curriculum on what employers want." While educational institutions should provide more than just skill training (Rickman, 2016), this advice is worth considering (see Brooks, 2009).

The participants also wanted a dedicated lesson or workshop where they could learn how to write professional emails. All the participants had to write internal and external emails daily; however, writing emails in a professional style for business proved to be a challenge. Therefore, Participant E stated: "I wish I learned how to write emails [in school]." Lastly, while commending university support systems such as writing centres, co-op opportunities (paid work experience), and service-learning (student volunteering in community organisations, see Wisla, Krauza, & Hu, 2017), the participants acknowledged that such services could be improved. The writing centre could be more accessible for students with increased hours and staff. Participant C commented: "I always went there [to the writing centre] and I wish they had more hours." Since academic faculty typically focus on content in student writing (Hu, 2000, 2010; Hyland, 2013), the writing centre is often the sole source of help for EAL students to improve their language. The issue has become more noteworthy as international student populations continue to grow on most university campuses in British Columbia. According to the BC Council for International Education, BC added a 31% increase in international students between 2015 and 2017, and in 2017 B.C.'s post-secondary institutions and K-12 schools were home to 152,390 international students (Roslyn Kunin & Associates, Inc., 2017). This increase represents a substantial jump from previous years and could have resulted in a strain on existing systems of support such as the writing centres in BC post-secondary institutions.

Discussion

Summary of Answers to the Research Questions

This section discusses the themes from the data analysis and participant interviews with regard to the research questions.

1. How do EAL employees graduated from English-speaking post-secondary institutions perceive English writing accuracy for the workplace? The study findings indicate that writing correct and clear English is very important, and it is a critical requirement for external communications. This finding is supported by business, technical, and professional writing textbooks (Bovee et al., 2020; Ewald, 2017; Lannon et al., 2021). Failure to write accurately and clearly can have differing levels of consequences such as financial losses, legal issues, client complaints and mistrust, damage to company image, and lost business or customers. Ewald (2017) explained that "poor communication at any stage of a project is very costly… [an email] can cause hurt feelings, ill will, and inaction. That inaction means that your good ideas or requests…or dire warnings may be ignored" (p. 3). An example Ewald (2017) cited is the 2006 Deepwater Horizon incident, where ignored warnings directly resulted in catastrophic damage and loss of life. As mentioned earlier, according to image theory (Beason, 2001, Hu & Hoare, 2017), inaccurate or unclear writing for the public can have a negative impact on the image of both the writer and the company. Unfortunately, as Hu and Hoare (2017)

noted, few studies have examined the negative consequences of poor writing in the workplace since Beason (2001) or communication in the workplace between native-English-speakers and non-native-English speakers (Derwing & Munro, 2009).

Although the participants did not mention dismissal owing to writing incompetence, Hu and Hoare (2017) indicated some employers did let employees go after the latter's repeated failures to improve language. Finally, employers and colleagues expect the same level of writing standards for EAL employees as they do for native-English speakers. Nevertheless, in general, the employee participants in this study appeared to have higher expectations of themselves regarding language clarity and accuracy than what the employer participants in the previous study (Hu & Hoare, 2017) expected of their EAL employees. However, in non-critical situations, less than perfect writing could be tolerated for internal communications, as was also found in the previous study (Hu & Hoare, 2017).

2. To what extent are the employees prepared for writing in English in the workplace? The interviews indicated that only learning basic writing skills at an academic institution was far from adequate for the workplace because the participants had to learn specialized work-related vocabulary and professional writing styles that were not taught at the institution. Therefore, the EAL employees generally did not feel well prepared for workplace writing. This incongruity between the writing skills that are taught in academia and those required in the workplace is a common issue among EAL graduates as language programs and universities mostly focus on academic language skills. They are different from business, technical, and professional writing styles that are field-specific and concerned with getting the point across clearly and efficiently (Bovee et al., 2020; Ewald, 2017; Lannon et al., 2021). For example, Lannon et al. (2021) distinguished literary writing and technical writing this way: "unlike poetry and fiction, which appeal mainly to our *imagination*, technical documents appeal to our *understanding*. Technical writing rarely seeks to entertain, create suspense, or invite differing interpretations" (n.p.). The emphasis on creativity and interpretation clearly makes literary writing feel different than what EAL graduates would see in the workplace. Technical writing requires "clearly defined structures and concise, readable prose. Those emphases result from meeting the reader's needs and priorities, not the writer's needs and goals" (Lannon et al., 2021, n.p.). While EAP is very useful for writing essays, creating arguments and discussions, and fostering a learning atmosphere within an academic structure, many students are taught to do this by universities that might assume they are going into an academic field. This can hurt the student's ability to understand and write in technical or business genres, which as stated above require vastly different methods and are written for different purposes. The participants echoed this mismatch and expressed a desire for universities to have taught them workplace writing styles.

One way to address the issue is to have the business sector provide a curriculum or ideas to help shape the curriculum (Brooks, 2009). This would give EAL students a better jumping-off point to learn specialised terms and writing styles in a general sense and be better prepared for learning highly specialised field-specific genres later on.

3. What writing tasks and challenges do the employees encounter in the workplace? The major writing tasks for the participants included emails, work notes, reports, letters, memos,

purchase and sale orders, and credit or loan applications. Challenges to writing in English came in many forms, but several commonalities the participants shared were professional writing style, grammar, unfamiliar technical terminology, unclear idiomatic expressions, and business and legal language. It is worth emphasizing that both this and the previous study (Hu & Hoare, 2017) found professional writing style to be a major challenge for EAL employees.

4. How do the employees think universities can better prepare EAL students for writing in the workplace? The participants suggested more business English, professional writing, and communication courses. Some of these English courses can be tailored to the needs of specific programs, such as business writing for business students, technical writing for science and technology students, and professional writing for healthcare and service-related students. If these courses are already offered, EAL students need to be made more aware of their importance for future careers. They also suggested enhanced support facilities such as a writing centre capable of accommodating more students. Furthermore, they suggested inviting employers and EAL graduates as guest speakers to learn about workplace expectations and experiences in British Columbia. Finally, they suggested increased co-op opportunities as well as using real-life examples and scenarios in class to prepare for life in the workplace in British Columbia.

Brooks (2009) made several similar recommendations for businesses to help EAL employees by placing emphasis on in-house training and utilizing work vocabulary and context. Training by third parties might decontextualize the context which is the most important part of the learning process. Brooks (2009) also made recommendations for educational institutions. For example, professors can teach or create classes that promote business-centric language and vocabulary as well as provide real-life and workplace scenarios, and EAL speakers with workplace experience can be consulted to help direct the course content. Finally, teaching English for the workplace such as emails, memos, and reports as well as the expectations of workplace communication, may help EAL students feel more prepared and help alleviate the pressure placed on businesses to re-train EAL graduates.

Conclusions

The study suggests that the EAL participants had high expectations of themselves regarding language clarity and accuracy in the workplace, possibly higher than what some of the employers had of their EAL employees in the previous study (Hu & Hoare, 2017). However, the participants generally did not feel well prepared for the writing tasks in the workplace. Thus, educational institutions need to strive to improve English education for EAL students so that EAL graduates can write accurately and clearly for the workplace. Moreover, targeted courses such as communications and business English could potentially alleviate some of the writing challenges that EAL graduates face at work. In addition, businesses and employers have a duty to provide professional development opportunities and resources concerning language for EAL employees. For instance, instead of third-party training, in-house training classes and seminars should be offered that utilize work vocabulary and writing (Brooks, 2009). However, businesses usually expect to hire employees who are competent in their ability to write effectively; thus, the burden is placed upon the educational institution to provide effective education that prepares EAL students for the workplace.

Recommendations for Educational Institutions

If a university does not offer such courses as communications, business writing, technical writing, and professional writing, then it should consider them. If it does offer the courses, then EAL students should be made aware of them. To that end, increased advertising and communication should be directed towards enrolling EAL students in these courses. This could be in the form of a simple class presentation to EAL students or provided as an option along with EAL courses. In addition, the university curriculum should include real-life examples and reflect what employers expect employees to be able to perform in terms of writing duties and standards. In this sense, the university can invite employers and EAL graduates with workplace experience as guest speakers to give lectures and workshops to both instructors and students.

Writing centres for EAL students. As academic faculty tend to focus on disciplinary content rather than language (Hoare & Hu, 2015; Hu, 2000; Hu & Hoare, 2017; Hyland, 2013) and may not have the time or language expertise to help EAL students (Hu, 2000; Hu, 2010), university writing centres should provide additional instruction for students by providing general vocabulary and specific terminology. Writing centres should also teach essay skills, both editing and revision, and supplementary education or general business practices such as workplace emails, memos, reports, manuals, and presentations. Indeed, as the second author of this article has witnessed, the use of the writing centre by EAL students at one BC institution has increased dramatically over the past few years, and many of the students went for help with business English. EAL students primarily use writing centres to learn technical writing, essay formats, editing and revision skills, and practical language skills, not all of which can be taught in academic classes. Writing centres have the advantage of flexibility in adapting to the needs of individual EAL students. However, this can only occur if writing centres are provided the appropriate resources to accommodate the increasing demands by students.

While the participants lauded writing centres for their services, they did report that there were shortfalls such as not being able to book an appointment or short hours which did not accommodate student schedules. An increase in staffing, hours of operation, and online asynchronous sessions could alleviate appointment problems. Writing centres could also add specific supplementary presentations and workshops on business and technical writing as well as workshops on writing emails, memos, and workplace correspondence. Finally, instructors could incorporate the use of a writing centre into a syllabus as an assignment to aid in students' education.

Further Research

The small sample size has limited potential to create a comprehensive overview of EAL employee perceptions on writing requirements of the workplace in British Columbia. Thus, future research could include surveys and interviews with additional participants representing a greater variety of professions. Finally, future research may involve universities considering the possibility of implementing suggestions from this study.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Interview Guide for EAL Employees

EAL Employees' Perspectives on Writing Accuracy, Preparedness, and Challenges for the Workplace

Certificate of Approval #100943

Background Information

Name:
Gender: [ ] male [ ] female. Year of birth:
Company/Institution:
Job title in company/institution (e.g., nurse):
Length of employment in the company/institution:
Country of origin:
EAL courses completed at university:
Degrees, diplomas, and certificates earned in anti-chronological order in Canada:

Sample questions

Views on language errors in work-related writing

Explanation: Work-related writing in this study can consist of one sentence but normally multiple sentences in one or multiple paragraphs. Typical examples are work-related reports, business correspondence, memos, minutes, and business/work emails.

Language errors can be in any of the following categories:
    a. grammar
    b. vocabulary
    c. spelling
    d. punctuation

   e.   upper/lower cases (capital and small letters)
   f.   professional writing style (clear, concise, and appropriate language)
   g.   clear expressions
   h.   other

1. What kinds of writing do you need to do for work at your company/institution?
2. Do you think writing correctly and clearly is important for success in your company/institution? Please answer and explain.
3. Do your supervisors, colleagues, and clients have the same kind of expectations regarding your writing ability and accuracy as for native-English speakers?
4. Have you ever had any challenges or problems in writing correctly and clearly in the workplace? Please explain. Possible challenges/problems can be in
      a.   grammar
      b.   vocabulary
      c.   spelling
      d.   punctuation
      e.   upper/lower cases (capital and small letters)
      f.   professional writing style (clear, concise, and appropriate language)
      g.   clear expressions
      h.   other
5. Do you want to deal with the writing problems? If so, do you have any ideas or plans for dealing with them?
6. Does your company/institution provide professional development opportunities and/or resources? If so, explain.
7. To what extent do you think your English-speaking post-secondary educational institution(s) (i.e., EAL department, academic courses, and other facilities such as a writing centre) prepared you for writing in English in the workplace?
8. What do you wish you had learned or learned to do at the institution mentioned in #7 in order to prepare for writing in the workplace?
9. What do you think EAL teachers, academic faculty, and the university should do respectively to best prepare EAL students for success in English writing in the workplace?
10. Do you have any comments or suggestions for the study?