

Literate Identity of ESL Workplace Writers

Nurul Kamalia Yusuf

Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, 32610 Seri Iskandar

Puteri Rohani Megat Abdul Rahim

Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, 32610 Seri Iskandar

Vanitha Thambirajah

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Malaysia

Daljeet Singh Sedhu

Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, 32610 Seri Iskandar

Abstract

Writing in a second language entices workers whose English is a second language. Employers spotted skill gaps in written workplace tasks, while new personnel performs inefficiently on their L2 writing tasks. L2 workplace writing literacy encompasses the practices that conform to the nature of an organisation. This study explores the experiences of L2 workplace writers to arrive at an understanding of workplace writing literacy. The empirical phenomenological approach was used to explore their transcendental experiences. 11 millennial generation personnel' experiences were gathered using the two-phase in-depth interviews and document analysis consisting of self-portraits and samples of workplace documentation. Their responses were analysed based on van Kaam's seven-step systematic thematic analysis. It was found that, in terms of workplace literacy, their experiences were manifested by transitions from a novice worker to a more literate workplace writer that is facilitated by the engagement with situated activities. Their literacy was exhibited through learning and mastery of literate workplace behaviour and identity. The participants possess at least a good command of language to perform their tasks and established workplace literacy in the transition they made through working. This study provides insights into education and professional preparation for general writing instruction and specific writing.

Keywords: workplace writing, workplace literacy, millennials, ESL writing, situated learning, phenomenology

1. Introduction

Literacy has traditionally been perceived as the ability to read and write. Albeit these are indispensable components of literacy, presently, our understanding of literacy engirds much more. In general, literacy is described as the confidence, ability, and willingness to engage with language to acquire, construct, and communicate meaning in daily life (Alberta Education, 2015). Today, literacy is fittingly defined as the requisite skill set to participate and advance in society (Gilbert, 2017). In workplace-related contexts, workers are integrating and applying common literacy practices to ascertain a literate identity.

Writing in general, is a complex and time-consuming task that requires determination from the writer. Writing in ESL is a critical communication skill in the workplace (Yusuf, Yunus & Embi, 2018). Workplace writing literacy crafts unique workplace cultures that encompass diverse workforces (Yunus, & Yusuf, 2019). The worker creates a sense of identity through their participation in workplace literacy. Literacy serves a workplace context, evolving a workforce identity and behaviour (Swart, 2018). This workplace identity includes competences to use and construct multi-modal texts (Swart, 2018). Eventually, a workplace literate identity enhances employability and demonstrates critical literacy behaviour, which changes an individual as a thinking workforce.

The existing literature on workplace writing has highlighted that the subject matter's discussion often lies in the stressors and resources or the challenges that contribute to learning and workplace writing in L2's processes and products. From the literature, it can be drawn that there is an insufficient number of current graduates who display workplace writing readiness. It thus questions IHL's current pedagogies for professional writing and ESL writing instruction in general. In times of constant economic revolution, employers favour workers who can work efficiently. Skill deficiencies in writing minutes of writing, emails, letters, and reports cause nuisances to the organisation. The skill deficit creates administrative delays, extensive revision, loss of time, shackle self-development, and squanders organisation on business opportunities (Knoch et al., 2016). The pressures and opportunities are sourced and influenced by the recent changes in the economic sector and technological revolution. For example, Mohammad and Maryam (2015) found that the complexity of the written tasks and the nature of writing skills are habitually viewed as the most challenging (Mohammad & Maryam, 2015). English as a second language contributes to an inseparable linguistic challenge and writing needs (Nur Ehsan & Saadiyah 2011; Ong et al. 2011). For L2 writers, their proficiency is an amalgam of two languages: native language and English, and both complex. Despite all the complexities that L2 writers have to get used and prepared with, there are gaps that the higher learning has overlooked when providing training to equip future professionals to write functionally in workplaces (Abdullah et al., 2014; Payne, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is overbearing to produce graduates with a high ability to communicate effectively at the workplace. Higher learning language programs focus on communicative skills, among other skills (Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012). It can be seen from universities and colleges' efforts to help students develop employability skills to satisfy industries' needs. For instance, written professional/ occupational communication skills courses; English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses that lie under the domain of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are offered (Vaghari & Shuib, 2013; Sarudin et al., 2013). These courses are normally geared to the industry's specifications and balance the socio-cultural needs of the context of use with the psycholinguistic cognitive needs of learners. Human capital who are skilful, experienced, and knowledgeable are deliberated as the most important component to push forward to the nation (Economic Planning Unit, 2015). In Malaysia, tertiary education is expected to produce future-proof graduates equipped with 21st-century career skills and proficient language skills (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2018). According to the Economic Planning Unit (2015), the country aspires to grow through its services sector. The aspiration requires to produce skilful graduates incessantly and retain graduates who are eligible to be hired in high income services sectors and sub-sectors. Thus, regardless of disciplinary background, the

graduates are vital and, most importantly, contribute to the high-income and developed nation. In other words, more research is desirable to understand the real literacy required for work and, the employees or the workplace writers within the workplace context.

Workplace literacy is bounded in the workplace context. The key role of literacy in a workplace transforms alongside the changing nature of work and management. The changing nature has huge implications on literacy, especially when workers are presented with work demands. The demands require workers to possess higher skills or continuous improvement (Jackson, 2000). Several studies indicate that literacy development in the workplace is situated and conceptualised in socio-cultural contexts. Based on this theoretical lens, literacy advances as workers progressively functionally use a particular workplace literacy. The progress happens through their engagement in the practices (Swart, 2018; Yunus & Yusuf, 2019). Through this construed perspective of socially and practicality situated literacy, particular layers of capabilities marked a literate identity. As depicted in Figure 1. Swart (2018) proposed that a literate identity is founded through four premises.

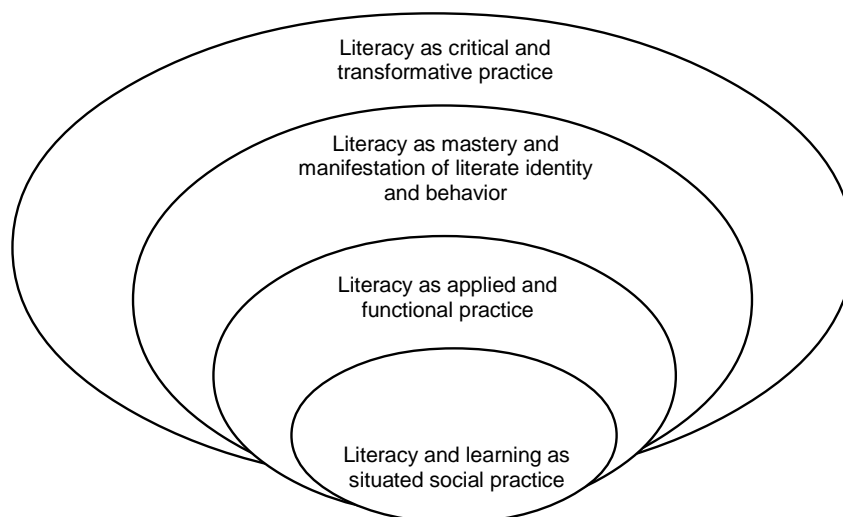


Figure 1: Workplace literacy conceptual map (Swart, 2018)

The transformation of behaviour establishes workplace literate identity and extends its ultimate goal in using critical literacy. Consequently, it changes the individual into a working and thinking human. A graduate that is equipped with similar essential skill has a higher chance of employability. Primarily, literacy is apparent in the events presented in social practices, for example, interactions that occur among different organisations (Swart, 2018). At this stage, literacy is thought of as instrumental or material. The material involves institutional histories that encircled their ideologies. The notion of workplace literate from the socially constructed lens focuses on the set of values, practices or functions, and the behaviours that workers who write share with co-workers within the same organisation (Machili, 2014; Swart, 2018). Subsequently, functional literacy practice includes the deployment of technology to produce texts (Yusuf et al., 2018). Research shows that literacy is established at this stage as workers can comprehend, create, decode, and eventually communicate functionally at work.

Next, the concept of workplace literacy is the manifestation of literate behaviour. It works past functional or active engagement in workplace practices. This concept encompasses

literate identity perceived as the competency of using critical literacy to meet the required standard. Yet, deviations within the boundaries of one profession or sector allegedly materialise. The differences are drawn by some factors presented by the local context, situations, and spatial demands (Machili, 2014). Outside of construed literacy through the socio-cultural context, practitioners place huge significance on connecting workplace tasks or functional context to workplace literacy.

Comparably, the concepts of social practice, learning, and transitions are profoundly acknowledged in the studies of second language (L2) workplace writing practices. Dias et al. (2011), for example, proposed the same concepts of outlining ESL workplace literacy. The standpoint of socially constructed practice is described in terms of the complexity of workplace writing's social motives. Meanwhile, a transition is explained as transformations from university writing/newcomers' writing to functional or workplace writing. Accordingly, in the present study, workplace literacy is confined in the complexity of workplace writing established by its social practice alongside the transitions that writers make through their work experiences.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

Objective 1: to describe the acquisition of literate identity of the L2 workers

Objective 2: to generate the meaning of literate identity based on the L2 workers' experiences

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The design of this study was based on the foundation of empirical phenomenology. This approach requires the participants to reminisce about their lived-experiences. It is to safeguard the revelation of the essence of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). As recommended by Giorgi (1997), a two-tiered method to garner descriptions from the participants was employed. The method permits a context to exist, followed by meaning (Bevan, 2014; Giorgi, 2008). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), context provides general information related to the surrounding that allows the researcher to locate a study in a larger context. The scheme of contexts found in the study was coded by using the thematic analysis strategy. Qualitative exploration believes that words are more meaningful than numbers. Thus, the study deployed a thematic analysis to identify, analyse, and data reporting (themes) (Miles, & Huberman, 1994).

In the present study, data were garnered from both verbal and visual. The data that was gathered from in-depth interviews are compared with the data from self-portrait descriptions. The in-depth interviews include (1) the reminiscence of the participants' lived-experiences of performing L2 workplace writing and (2) their life-history to create the context of the study. Meanwhile, the data from self-portrait descriptions were gathered by asking the participants to sketch by visualising them in a workplace writing task situation. This approach alleviated the exploration of the phenomenon under investigation and discovered supplementary data obscured from interviews. Throughout the interviews, pre-determined questions were rambled to maintain a continuation of particular responses. It is essential to capture the research objectives and aims without wasting both the researchers' time and effort (Gaskell, & Bauer, 2000). The data of the interviews were organised and transcribed using ATLAS.ti 8.

The data were analysed using Van Kaam's modified systematic thematic analysis, as Moustakas (1994) suggested. The analysis includes seven steps process used to guide the phenomenological data. The process allows for discovering patterns and themes, data reduction, imaginative variation (or construction of meaningful categories), and ultimately, the synthesis of the data's meaning.

In the study, data triangulation that includes time triangulation and different sources was expended to determine the unity of the event under investigation across time and the various data sources. This triangulation was adopted as proposed by Giorgi (1997) in which two types of data elicitation were employed. In consideration of the data source triangulation, interviews were conducted in two phases in which the researcher and participants were engaged in a prolonged period. UNAIDS (2010) proposed the importance of delineating triangulation from a qualitative research perspective.

2.2 Participants

In the study, the selected participants are the millennial generation workforce or those born in 1982 and 2004. The selection of the particular generation of workforces was due to their significant contribution to the shift in the global workforce's generational composition (Bartek, 2014). This specific group of workforces must have performed writing in English at their respective workplace. It is vital to understand them as they fervently hold a different view on communication (Myers, & Sadaghiani, 2010). Along with their lived experience with ESL workplace writing, they were selected by reflecting into a set of criteria, i.e., degree holders. They have been working within the same organisation for at least five years. A likely explanation is that an individual worked for more than five years have grasped their work culture (Merriam, 2009).

The study participants work in Malaysia's five different services sectors: communication, manufacturing, government services, power and utility, and finance. A phenomenological inquiry can be made up of five to 25 interview participants with have the lived experience of the event under investigation (Polkinghorne, 1989; Yin, 2015). Table 1 shows eight participants involved in the study.

Table 1: The participants involved in this study

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

FINDINGS

The study suggests that the participants have experienced a complex workplace writing process, which then led to learning (at work and through work through) and transitions of their identity. They attempted to become part of the community or practice. As a result, they acquired workplace literacy or became more competent in accomplishing work-related writing tasks.

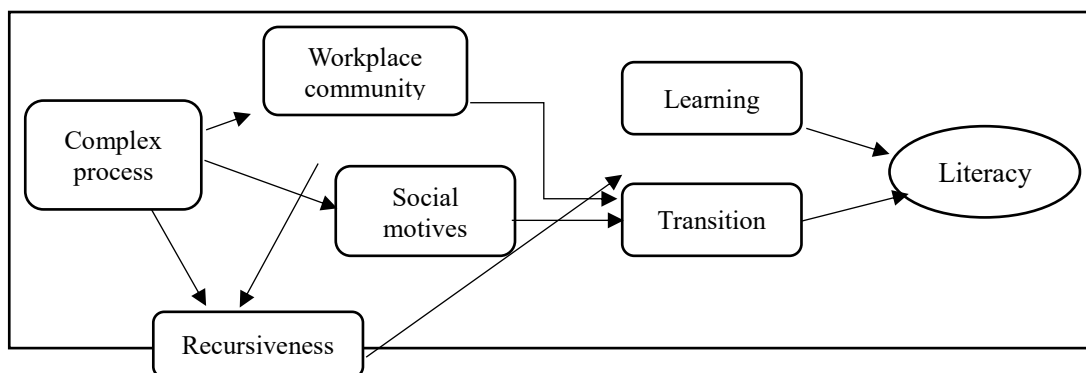


Figure 2: Workplace Literacy Acquisition

As represented in Figure 2, workplace writing is a complex process demonstrated by the recollection of the difficulty they faced as newcomers years ago. The complexity is implicated in the complicated dynamics of workplace texts and the workers as the writers. For example, Izz recalled, *"I find the task made me think back where I put myself, organise my thoughts which I found difficult back then, even now"* (Izz/iv). The description of his self-portrait supported the complexity of writing. He described, *"at that time I wanted to put a lot of points in one heading, but unsure"* (Izz/sp).

Producing a written task allows the emergence of complexity that vastly affects the writing situation; the participants had made transitions since their employment. Bree, Casey and Dan believed that the nature of service that their workplace provides *"governed by... reflected the community and national values"* (Bree/iv). Thus, the social motive or sometimes multiple social motives inspire the genres they are supposed to use. This genre is usually obscure to the newcomers. As reflected by Dan, *"felt accountable to meet the situation, it worries me a lot"* (Dan/iv).

The participants felt they have become more meticulous about accountability, especially when their superiors or managers monitor. *"It's like big brother is looking at us"* (Faz/iv). He went on, *"because goes to our head of department... to the superiors, back and forth before publishing"* (Faz/iv). Similarly, Casey knew that he needed to meet the standards as his tasks are *"constantly being looked at by the director this also justify our accomplishment, the organisation's"* (Casey/iv). The administration is continually looking at their progress. Thus, they have to demonstrate their ability to identify the genre that suits the motive of the documents or reports they produce. After all, the product goes to a specific audience that also justifies the performance of their organisation. Their knowledge of the audience determines how and which language is used in the texts. As narrated by Bree and Dan, in delivering government services, they have to shape their writing to a specific group of readers whether

they are the external or internal audience. In Malaysia, 70% of government texts/ correspondence are produced in the national language, Malay language. Whereas, especially when communicating with international readers, *"30% in English because my work with industry players"* (Dan/iv). They were also concerned about other linguistic aspects when preparing a workplace text, *"like grammar, wonder if inappropriate words, tense appear"* (Faz/iv).

Apart from the audience, the recursive workplace writing process requires that the participants communicate and respond to their co-workers' situations. They were aware of Baby Boomer co-workers who have different work styles and preferences. Alice shared, *"they prefer to sit down, discuss... to me unnecessary"* (Alice/iv). She explained this generation's writing style, primarily when they work as a team *"they are more poetic. Lengthy... my style is more straightforward"* (Alice/iv). Their workplace community contributes to not just a challenge but also a decision on the writing style.

As a result of their struggles, especially as newcomers, they experienced learning that emerged from task engagement. Learning through work was recalled by all participants from all the sectors involved in the study. Alice, Dan, and Zed described learning at work as enhancing their writing skill to suit a task. The workers as newcomers have picked up the language skills required to doing their job besides enhances their general English skills. Correspondingly, as they have a better command of English, their confidence level also increases. Alice mentioned that a transition is necessary at work, *"it helps me to improve my English, besides helps me writing"* (Alice/iv). Dan was steered into continuous learning at work, which he said facilitated his command, *"learning process, and then from time-to-time continuous improvement"* (Dan/iv). Similarly, Ez revealed about learning as a result of engagement in practice on his L2 command. He went on, *"I suppose this helps improves my English for myself and the job"* (Ez/iv). Participation in the tasks initiated learning that facilitates Bree's and Zed's transitions into literate workplace writers. Zed emitted,

we learned, and then we improve for our job" (Bree/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"* (Zed/iv).

Other than enhancement through doing tasks, the participants' transitions as part of workplace literacy occur through enrollment in training and social interaction. The participants recalled that trainings were conducted whether internally or outside their workplace, *"we have such trainings conducted here (workplace)"* (Faz/iv). Usually, their management organised structured training with selected modules, as Faz said: *"the courses prepared, scheduled by the corporate training division"* (Faz/iv). Bree considered the activity that was explicitly organised for writing as a form of the learning continuum. *"HR people do is like create these courses, short courses a day or two courses of writing... there I learned how to facilitate myself to the context"* (Bree/iv). Casey also believed that he felt accountable to put himself in his community of practice standards.

I tried to put myself in my colleagues' shoes... when we can measure of productivity so in the end we are dealing with the same issues and results (Casey/iv).

In other words, the structured learning facilitates the workers' transitions into the context, and a sense of accountability towards their cumulative productivity leads to their willingness to adapt to the standards. Thus, the workers encountered a range of experiences that provided learning through their participation in tasks, social interaction, and training that facilitated their ideology transitions. The change is related to enhancing their writing and L2 command and adjustment to meet the everyday situation of workplace writing in English. The transition from a novice workplace writer to a competent writer reflects the L2 workplace writing literacy manifestation.

DISCUSSION

The complex workplace setting reflects the difficulty that newcomers encounter as they attempt to become competent and part of the practice community. The workers participated in their workplace community that eventually has a settled set of everyday situation or genre. A genre is established in response to the condition or perceived collective sameness or ideology. The standards or genres exist and reflect writing tasks as situated. The process takes place in the way that elicits actions by workers by means of words. The workplace community is referred to as a community of practice herein. Participation in this community started as the workforce, especially as newcomers try to acquire the ways of doing, knowing, and learning the standardised situation to accomplish a task or to thrive in the community of practice.

RQ1: How do the workforces acquire their workplace literate identity?

The study concludes that the participants have established a workplace writing literate identity by getting used to the situated or functional practice. Eventually, according to Swart (2018), these actions contribute to the mastery of specific workplace identity or behaviour. One exciting finding is learning constituted in large part of the workers' transitions. In other words, they have moved successfully from a novice workplace writer to a competent writer. Complex rhetorical workplace environments cause shifts for workers, especially beginners. The nature of workplace writing is entrenched in its complexity. As the workers strived to achieve the same ideology at their worksites, they engaged with the challenges. Writing entices them due to the implicated extensiveness and sophistication of workplace nature. According to Dias et al. (2011), workplace writing complexity is embedded in its members' dynamics. This study's outcomes extend that the selected participants attempted to adjust with the co-workers of different backgrounds and co-workers from another generation, the Baby Boomers. Verily, an adjustment has been one of the attributed significant problems of workplace literacy (Dias et al., 2011). Also, workplace writing complexity refers to the obstacles the beginners faced as they attempted a transition from university writing into work. Dias et al. (2011) showed that the complex dynamics of writing in the workplace are between authors and documents. Tasks are positioned as dependent, highly placed, and ideological naturally. In social practice, ambiguity is also enacted. The art includes the interaction between authors and readers.

The participants go through learning through social interaction and actions: first-hand experience and participation in training and teamwork. The finding reflects those of Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning. Learning while doing real work is acknowledged as a situated experience. Learning transpires as a result of perpetual engagement with the practices. The involvement has enhanced their L2 writing skill. This finding supports the evidence of the

impact of engagement in tasks on the amount of transferred written linguistic knowledge (Zhang, 2019). The current study found that the workers experienced literacy or transition in an arrangement of everyday activity (situated tasks) and social interaction. They also acquired workplace literacy through ongoing growth facilitated by hands-on learning, which took place as they engaged with the chores.

RQ2: What is the meaning of literate identity based on the L2 workers' experiences

Work-related learning and transitions were inevitable, especially among newcomers. The forms of writing they have to perform vary depending on the nature of the services they provide, their respective social motives, and the kinds of audience. Despite the differences in the forms and motives, they seemed to congruently move successfully from novice workplace writers to a more competent writer. The transition happens due to their willingness to learn and adapt to the standards. Besides, they felt accountable for the organisation's cumulative productivity. The way they learn is in practice by being aware of the complexity of workplace writing. The workers increasingly progressed as they become acquainted with the regularities of their workplace activities. They had gone through and adapted to the complex spectrum of textual styles, conventions, and even social relationships in making the transition to completion of their writing duties. They looked at the audience to determine the social motives and present the writing piece, the team members they work with, and the process they have to go through.

As mentioned in the literature review, workplace writing is implicated in its context. The community or co-workers they work with complicates workplace writing. The findings confirm that the workers sought to adjust to their co-workers of different disciplinary backgrounds and work with peers from different generations. These findings reinforce prior research on the difficulty faced by workplace writers due to multiple areas of specialisation. It has always been one of the workplace's primary problems (Dias et al., 2011). These findings indicate that the workers have undergone transitions to their workplace writing practices. They have experienced a combination of everyday activity (engagement in tasks) and social interaction, which Lave and Wenger (1991) scoped as 'intra-individual' (Dias et al., 2011).

Remarkably, incidental learning was observed as more prominent and effective for the workers. Prior studies have noted the importance of participation in employment and skills development. Skills that are effectively deployed in the workplace contributes to productivity (Swart, 2018). It was also found that habitual practice and structured training, as Bree told, facilitate a continuum of learning. A possible explanation for this might be that participation promotes individual learning and growth, resulting in efficient work while simultaneously becoming meaningful (Black et al., 2015). In sum, the selected participants experienced both guided and incidental learning, in which the latter is more meaningful.

Conclusion

Therefore, it is suggested that workplace writing in ESL literacy education is integrated and focused on the actual work environment. Perhaps the most important is to incorporate writing skills through situated activities. The activities enhance novice writers' willingness to participate and acquire information about the tasks. They are also made aware that good command of language is crucial for that purpose. There is much room for further progress in determining ESL in workplace use literacy, i.e., investigating workers' work values, workplace

genre studies, and workplace writer's mental operations that involve learning, knowing, and doing. Therefore, it can be assumed that in combination with the explored dimensions from this study, future research should help us look at the relationships and effectiveness of the dimensions to establish literacy.

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