

The Workplace Writing Experiences of EAL Professionals

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A review of the literature on English second language (L2) writing skills reveals a need for more research on the workplace writing experiences of L2 professionals employed in English as an additional language (EAL) contexts. Through a semi-structured interview and a think-aloud activity, this study gathered qualitative data with the aim of gaining insight into the workplace writing practices, challenges, and strategies of five EAL professionals with developing workplace writing skills, employed in Toronto. The data were initially analyzed using a thematic analysis technique, and upon further exploration, three factors were identified as influential in the development of the participants' workplace writing skills: motivation, awareness of the role of self, and awareness of the role of others.

Une revue de la littérature sur les compétences d'écriture en anglais langue seconde (ALS) révèle la nécessité de mener davantage de recherches à propos des expériences d'écriture dans le milieu de travail des professionnels ayant appris l'ALS et qui travaillent dans des contextes d'anglais en tant que langue additionnelle (ALA). En utilisant des entretiens semi-dirigés et des activités de réflexion à haute voix, cette étude qualitative avait pour objectif de mieux comprendre les pratiques, défis et stratégies d'écriture en milieu de travail de 5 professionnels ALA, ayant des compétences d'écriture en développement et travaillant à Toronto. Les données ont été initialement analysées suivant une technique d'analyse thématique. Des analyses plus approfondies ont mené à l'identification de trois facteurs d'influence dans le développement des compétences d'écriture en milieu de travail chez les participants : la motivation, la conscience du rôle de soi-même et la conscience du rôle des autres.

Keywords: business writing; EAL; immigrant professionals; workplace learning; workplace writing challenges; workplace writing strategies

For decades, concerns have existed about the workplace writing skills of first language (L1) and second language (L2) professionals (Davies & Birbili, 2000; Knoch et al., 2016; Lentz, 2013). There are several reasons for these concerns. Writing errors have the potential to harm an organization's image (Beason, 2001; Gubala et al., 2020; Hu & Hoare, 2017) and lead to business-to-business and business-to-consumer misunderstandings, sometimes causing costly delays or jeopardizing profits (Du, 2020; Knoch et al., 2016). Writing errors may have legal implications (Davies & Birbili, 2000; Knoch et al., 2016) or cause accidents or injury (Duff et al., 2000; Hu & Gonzales, 2020; Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999), particularly in professions where a misplaced decimal or word, or the wrong units of measurement, can result in serious

misunderstandings. For instance, in health-care professions, where workers rely heavily on the documentation of other staff, errors can jeopardize the health and safety of vulnerable persons. Writing errors can also raise doubts about the competence of an employee, hamper opportunities for advancement (Beason, 2001; Gubala et al., 2020; Hu & Gonzales, 2020; Hu & Hoare, 2017; Wolfe et al., 2016), and possibly lead to dismissal, especially in tough economic times (Machili, 2014).

Considering these implications, it is in the best interest of all employees to communicate effectively in writing for work-related purposes, but this can pose challenges for some L2 professionals in English as an additional language (EAL) contexts, where employers may hold the same expectations for all workers, regardless of language ability (Hu & Gonzales, 2020; Hu & Hoare, 2017). Li (2000) referred to the integration of L2 speakers in English-dominant workspaces as “double socialization” because “often, they are novices in the new working environment—which may be in a different field from their prior training and experience—and they are novices in the new language and culture” (p. 62).

Proficiency in one of Canada’s official languages (English or French) is known to be a major factor in the effective economic integration of immigrants (Derwing & Waugh, 2012; Gibb, 2015; Kaushik & Drolet, 2018; Roberts, 2010; Weiner, 2008). Since the late twentieth century, discussions on competent or “legitimate” uses of English (Bourdieu, 1977; Gibb, 2015; Graddol, 2004; Norton Peirce, 1995) have focused almost exclusively on speaking (Blommaert, 2013; Lillis & McKinney, 2013). That tendency has begun to change as sociolinguists increasingly realize that writing can no longer be overlooked, especially as digital communication raises greater concerns about and interest in writing than ever before (Blommaert, 2013). It may be helpful at this point to consider some characteristics of contemporary workplace writing.

Overview of Workplace Writing

Twenty-first century workplace writing is distinguished from other genres of writing by references to such phenomena as globalization, the knowledge economy, the information age, restructuring of companies, and flattened hierarchies (Angouri & Harwood, 2008; Fitzpatrick & O’Dowd, 2012; Roberts, 2010). Unlike scholarly or scientific writing, workplace writing is fluid and dynamic (Fraiberg, 2013; Machili, 2014); namely, it is less predictable and formulaic than other forms of writing. Workplace writing products and processes tend to vary among and within organizations (Angouri & Harwood, 2008; Apelman, 2010; Davies & Birbili, 2000); furthermore, many workplace writing practices allow relatively little time for planning and composing multiple drafts, especially in fast-paced work settings. For these reasons and more, Davies and Birbili (2000) described workplace writing as “a highly demanding and complex mental activity” (p. 436). To further complicate matters, computer-mediated communication (e.g., email, web chat, and instant messaging) has blurred the lines between spoken and written communication (Chun et al., 2016; Lockwood, 2017; Myles, 2009; Pihlaja, 2020).

Further to the preceding characteristics, workplace writing is intertextual in its tendency to intertwine with other literacies (Fraiberg, 2013, 2018; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002), such as prior verbal interactions (e.g., telephone conversations or discussions during face-to-face or online meetings). It is multimodal (Du, 2020; Fraiberg, 2013, 2018) in that ideas may be communicated in various communications media or technologized modes such as music, images, and video (Chun et al., 2016; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002). As well, it is often collaborative, as the process of writing for work-related purposes typically involves consulting others for input (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Artemeva, 1998; Knoch et al., 2016; Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999). Finally, workplace writing is social. Like most other forms of writing, the general purpose is to communicate ideas to others. However, on another level, the acquisition of workplace writing practices is often dependent upon the extent of interaction with one’s colleagues (Beaufort, 2000; Du, 2020; Duff et al., 2000; Leki et al., 2008; Machili, 2014; Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999).

The literature on workplace writing shows that advances in technology have made it almost impossible for most of today's workers to avoid writing. Although handwritten notes are still composed occasionally, the written communication in today's workspaces is largely technology-driven, as illustrated by the three studies presented briefly below.

Technology Use

Lockwood (2017) examined the web-chat communication practices of Filipino contact-centre agents at an American company based in Manila. She compared templates used in web-chat exchanges to those used in traditional call centres. The main purpose of such tools was to prevent periods of dead air; however, agents usually had very little time to ascertain customers' needs in order to select an appropriate script or template. For this reason, web-chat communication was found to present some unique challenges, even more so because the agents were expected to engage in multiple chats simultaneously. Lockwood concluded that due to its unique features, web chat could not be treated merely as another form of written or spoken communication. It is an excellent example of a contemporary workplace writing task that is fluid and dynamic (Fraiberg, 2013; Machili, 2014) and allows little time for planning (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002). As noted by Chun et al. (2016), "One of the traditional hallmarks of writing was that it afforded greater processing time than speech did. But in the age of electronic communication, this is not always the case" (p. 67).

Two studies of an Israeli high-tech company offer further illustration of the complexity of twenty-first-century workplace writing practices (Fraiberg 2013, 2018). The author conducted a six-month ethnographic study during which he observed workplace activities performed by Hebrew-speaking employees who were highly proficient in English. He examined the use of a wide range of writing tools, digital and otherwise, for example, sticky notes, whiteboard text, social networking tools, online dictionaries, translation apps and templates, email, and chats. Fraiberg (2013) observed how one employee made skillful use of all of these tools as she worked with a team to construct an online poll; as well, he documented how the various tools were used in the execution of other workplace writing projects. Moreover, Fraiberg (2018) analyzed design sketches, handwritten notes from meetings, and text messages, in addition to observing body language, recording verbal exchanges, and interviewing the CEO of the company. He concluded that the multimodal nature of twenty-first-century workplace writing calls for approaches to writing instruction which take into account the interaction of digital and human resources that is typical of today's workplace writing practices.

The experiences above may not reflect those of most employees, but as suggested by Fitzpatrick and O'Dowd (2012), L2 professionals who at least have the technological skills to navigate the twenty-first-century workplace should find themselves at an advantage, in all sectors.

Preparation for Workplace Writing

The literature indicates that newly hired employees (L1 and L2 speakers) are often unprepared to fulfill workplace writing demands to the satisfaction of employers. This was found to be the case with university graduates employed in engineering, IT, and health-care professions in Australia (Arkoudis et al., 2009); with engineering and accounting graduates in Australia (Knoch et al., 2016); and within diverse sectors (engineering, banking, government, police, marketing, law, non-profit, and others) in the United Kingdom (Davies & Birbili, 2000). With respect to interns and new graduates, some studies suggest that discipline-specific, tertiary instruction generally offers minimal training in real-life workplace writing practices. Rather, such instruction emphasizes writing for academic purposes and assesses written assignments

almost exclusively for content knowledge or “demonstration of learning” (Freedman & Adam, 1996, p. 411), offering little or no feedback on errors, which prevents students from improving their writing skills (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Hu & Hoare, 2017; Knoch et al., 2016; Kohn, 2015). Hu and Hoare (2017) reported that when postsecondary EAL students struggled with written assignments, they usually sought assistance from university writing centres and private tutors, but in the absence of feedback from their professors, students cared little about accuracy and clarity in their writing and continued to face difficulties writing accurately even after years of study. In addition to the emphasis on demonstrating content knowledge, there is considerable focus on preparing EAL students for high-stakes general and academic English tests (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Knoch et al., 2016).

It is not unusual for newly hired employees to experience a learning curve as they adjust to workplace practices (Davies & Birbili, 2000; Freedman & Adam, 1996; Leki et al., 2008). However, across almost all of the occupational sectors represented in the selected literature, L2 workers employed in English-dominant contexts generally felt ill-equipped for the realities of workplace writing (e.g., Alali, 2019; Apelman, 2010; Bremner, 2012; Hu & Gonzales, 2020; Machili, 2014).

Development of Workplace Writing Skills

Due to the social and frequently collaborative natures of writing, the literature is saturated with real-life examples of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) that illustrate the ways in which the oral and written communication skills of L2 professionals benefit from social interaction with proficient speakers of English in English-dominant workspaces (e.g., Bremner, 2012; Du, 2020; Duff et al., 2000; Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999). The literature also offers occasional glimpses of the ways in which the development of these skills can be hindered due to a lack of such interaction.

The substantial attention given to socialization in the second language acquisition (SLA) literature demonstrates the vital role played by this learning principle in the development of workplace writing skills; hence, this concept, along with other relevant principles related to the theory of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) will be revisited in the discussion of the findings.

Workplace Writing Challenges

Despite the evolution of workplace writing over the past few decades, many genres of written communication remain unchanged. Depending on their occupation and level of responsibility, employees may still be required to write meeting minutes, memos, reports, proposals, and/or letters. In more specialized fields, genres tend to be occupation-specific, as in the cases of engineers (Du, 2020; Knoch et al., 2016), accounting professionals (Knoch et al., 2016), IT professionals (Fraiberg, 2013, 2018), health-care professionals (Duff et al., 2000; Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999), legal professionals (Hartig & Lu, 2014), and educators (Faez, 2010).

Communicating clearly in writing can be a significant challenge due to the different writing processes and genres of writing that may exist within one organization (Angouri & Harwood, 2008). Furthermore, writers may need to make numerous decisions, such as selecting a suitable channel of communication, responding in a sensitive situation (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002; Machili, 2014), or considering how to address audiences who are copied in on an email (Machili, 2014). In hierarchical contexts, communication may be upward, downward, lateral, or any combination thereof; style, tone, and content must be given due consideration in each case (Machili, 2014). In more technical or specialized occupations, choices may include the use of general English, business English, technical English, or plain English. With non-technical genres such as minutes and emails that vary in tone, style, and register, there are other decisions to be made, depending on the intended audience. Added to all of the above, some L2

professionals may face language-based, culturally based, and social challenges. These challenges will be discussed later, in relation to the findings.

Research Questions

The literature search yielded 14 studies related to the workplace writing experiences of L2 speakers employed in an EAL context. Those studies were conducted in Australia (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Knoch et al., 2016); the United States (Bausser, 2000; Du, 2020; Hartig & Lu, 2014; Pihlaja, 2020); and Canada (Artemeva, 1998; Duff et al., 2000; Faez, 2010; Hu & Gonzales, 2020; Hu & Hoare, 2017; Myles, 2009; Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999). Eight additional studies involved L2 professionals employed in multinational companies and global work teams. Five of the 22 studies focused to some extent on the transition from writing for academic purposes to workplace writing (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Hu & Gonzales, 2020; Hu & Hoare, 2017; Knoch et al., 2016; Myles, 2009), one study highlighted internationally educated professionals (IEPs) and paid brief attention to writing (Faez, 2010), and one study involved both IEPs and international students, and challenges associated with the use of plain English for legal writing in the United States (Hartig & Lu, 2014). Apart from the three studies on technology use, presented earlier (Fraiberg, 2013, 2018; Lockwood, 2017), there were few detailed references to the use of technology in L2 workplace writing activities.

One study (Hu & Gonzales, 2020) focused exclusively on the workplace writing challenges and strategies of EAL employees (former international students and graduates of postsecondary programs based in British Columbia). At the time of the study, the participants had been employed for between six months and eight years in retail and financial services, import/export, healthcare, IT, and animal care. The research focused on the types of writing activities performed by the employees in their work, their perspectives on the importance of strong workplace writing skills, challenges experienced, and plans for improvement. This study and earlier research on the expectations of EAL employers (Hu & Hoare, 2017) focus largely on differences between academic and workplace writing practices.

As the literature review revealed distinct differences between classroom and workplace learning and provided insight into challenges encountered by L2 professionals performing writing tasks in English-dominant workspaces, the purpose of this research project was to determine how L2 professionals with developing workplace writing skills manage on-the-job writing demands in an EAL context. Thus the research was guided by the following questions:

- RQ1: What workplace writing challenges are typically experienced by EAL professionals with developing workplace writing skills?
- RQ2: What strategies are employed to fulfill on-the-job writing expectations?
- RQ3: In what ways are workplace writing tasks facilitated using technology?

Methods

Participants

IEPs attending occupation-specific language training (OSLT) classes at a local community college, as well as IEPs who had completed a similar program years prior, were invited to participate in the study. The participants possessed varying amounts of workplace writing experience in English and at least an intermediate level of proficiency in writing (CLB 6/IELTS 5.5). Table 1 presents the profiles of the five

participants who consented to participate in the study. Their first languages were Spanish, Mandarin, and Russian.

Table 1
Participants' Profiles

Name ^a	Gender & Age range	Education	Sector	Role & Level	Size of employer	% of writing per shift ^b
Marina	F 36 to 45	Graduate degree	Financial services	Collections specialist Intermediate	500+	under 25%
Victor	M 36 to 45	Undergraduate degree	Hospitality	Night auditor Intermediate	5 to 99	over 75%
Anastasia	F 36 to 45	Undergraduate degree	Real estate	Analyst Intermediate	100 to 499	50% to 75%
Carlos	M 46 to 55	Graduate degree	Financial services	Finance manager Senior	500+	50% to 75%
Sue	F 36 to 45	Graduate degree	Logistics	Sales and trade coordinator Intermediate	500+	over 75%

^a Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants.

^b Percentage of writing in English per typical shift.

Data Collection

The data-collection methods consisted of a semi-structured interview and a think-aloud activity. A preliminary questionnaire served two purposes: first, as a screening tool to identify candidates who met the criteria to participate in the interview and think-aloud due to their proficiency in writing and extent of workplace writing experience; second, as a means of acquainting potential participants with the scope of the study by eliciting information about their workplace writing practices. These data were helpful in guiding the design of the interview and the think-aloud activity.

As it is generally neither practical nor feasible to observe participants performing writing tasks in their workplaces due to privacy standards (Leki et al., 2008; Parks, 2016), the think-aloud activity was conducted as an alternative. Through this introspective method (Charters, 2003), participants were directed to verbalize their thought processes in relation to a common workplace writing task. Because think-aloud activities lend insight only to working memory, they are viewed by some researchers as somewhat limited in their ability to provide a complete picture; nonetheless, following a review of 94 studies involving the use of such techniques, Fox et al. (2011) concluded that, even with its limitations, think-aloud is “a legitimate and practicable method of collecting information on thought processes” (p. 338).

The interview aimed to identify factors in the development of participants' workplace writing skills, strategies and technology used to perform workplace writing tasks, and elicit recommendations for

other EAL professionals (see Appendix A). The think-aloud activity, administered immediately following the interview, required participants to select one workplace writing task (see Appendix B) and reflect upon the actions they would most likely take while planning, composing, and revising the task, including the digital tools that they would be most likely to use. No writing was required. Together, the interview and think-aloud method varied from 40 to 60 minutes per participant. Both methods were recorded via videoconferencing software, and the data were transcribed and approved by the participants.

Analysis

The data were first analyzed using template analysis, a deductive, a priori approach (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). The literature findings and the research questions guided the process of assigning codes to the data. The first phase of this analysis entailed (a) “unitizing” the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 344), that is, breaking down phrases, sentences, or paragraphs into informational units, (b) categorizing similar ideas or units of information, (c) checking the groups for overlap, and (d) reducing the idea units to as few themes as possible. First, I identified four main themes, upon which the research questions were based: development of workplace writing skills, challenges, strategies, and technology/tools. Then I reviewed the transcripts, labelling the data with 10 sub-themes identified in the literature review: social aspects of writing development, formal writing instruction, experiential learning, challenges (language-based, culturally based, and social), positive and negative coping strategies, and benefits and drawbacks of technology.

To extend the analysis of the data beyond the predetermined themes, I opted to use an open coding technique (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), which enabled me to capture additional themes: feelings about writing, self-study efforts, references to experience with different writing tasks, importance of writing skills, and recommendations for other EAL professionals. In the final phase of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I reduced all of the previously mentioned themes to three key factors that I determined to be central to the development and acquisition of workplace writing skills: motivation, awareness of the role of self, and awareness of the role of others. Discussion of these key factors will follow in the findings.

Findings

Workplace Writing Challenges

Presented here are examples of general writing challenges faced by two participants, particularly with regard to decisions about writing tasks.

During the think-aloud activity, Sue, whose role was that of a sales and trade coordinator, reflected on factors that might require consideration for the task she had selected (writing a reply email to a potential customer):

before I send the email, I think about the potential customer who has sent the email. Is it a big customer, from a big company? Or is it a small company? Is it from overseas, from an international company? Or domestic company? And also the product or service inquired about—Is it a very popular product or something we have in stock or something we need to make to order? The volume they need is also a very important part—if they need a big volume the price will be lower; if it’s a small volume the price may be higher. Also, is it a one time order or a regular customer, things like that. So during my writing I need to make sure that what I have

replied will meet their needs, that I've answered all their questions, because with the products they may need services, when they buy something we need to arrange transportation. Like, international customers need to think about how to transport the stuff, through air, through ocean, or through highway, things like that. And I also need to talk with the sales team to see what's the best way—what's the best price for them. (Sue)

With genres of workplace writing that vary in tone, style, and register (level of formality), choices may need to be made depending on the intended audience. Consider Anastasia's response during the think-aloud activity, when asked if she would consult anyone for feedback on her selected task (writing a short report on professional development options):

For something like this, probably not. Well, in terms of writing, maybe. It's a very tricky question. Because it really depends where this report goes. If this report goes to a very, very high level, I would ask someone to proofread it for me. If it's just local management who knows me well and understands what I usually say in my writing, I wouldn't because they already know my style; they already know what to expect from me. But if it's somebody new, I would probably cross check it with somebody from my department or management or maybe colleague. It depends. (Anastasia)

Language-Based Challenges

Since minor mistakes in grammar, spelling, capitalization, and mechanics (e.g., punctuation) are made even by L1 writers, some employers are willing to tolerate such errors from L2 writers as long as the communicative purpose of the writing is clear (Apelman, 2010; Hu & Hoare, 2017; Wolfe et al., 2016). Language-based challenges also include writing with conciseness, brevity, and clarity (Du, 2020; Knoch et al., 2016), adjusting writing style or register (Bausser, 2000; Du, 2020), and the potential for negative transfer from L1 to L2 writing practices (Alali, 2019). Moreover, workers in various occupations may face challenges due to gaps in general English vocabulary or limited familiarity with occupation-specific jargon (Bremner, 2012; Du, 2020; Duff et al., 2000; Faez, 2010; Hu & Gonzales, 2020), especially when terminology is constantly being updated due to new products and materials (Alali, 2019; Machili, 2014).

The following discussion will focus on challenges related to conciseness, evaluating writing, length/complexity of writing, negative transfer from L1 to L2, understanding spoken instructions, and vocabulary issues.

Conciseness. The literature indicates that some L2 professionals experienced difficulties writing with conciseness, brevity, and clarity (Du, 2020; Knoch et al., 2016). This was true for Marina, who expressed concern about her habit of writing "big emails."

Evaluating writing. One challenge that was mentioned by three participants but was absent from the reviewed literature was the uncertainty of knowing when to stop evaluating one's writing, that is, knowing for certain when a particular text was adequate for delivery to its intended audience. Victor, Anastasia, and Carlos reported that this posed a challenge for them at times. Anastasia and Carlos were able to seek feedback from more proficient writers and actively did so when needed; however, Victor lacked such opportunities since he worked alone.

Length/complexity of writing. This aspect of writing posed difficulties for Sue and Carlos, who reported that they had occasionally faced challenges performing complex writing tasks:

At first, it may take a very long time to write a very long email. (Sue)

Workplace writing tasks are more simple and I can use short sentences and bullet points. On the other hand, external reports or letters require more extensive lexicon and much elaborated syntax. For that reason it is more challenging for me when I have to write long essays, letters or reports. (Carlos)

Negative transfer from L1 to L2. Like some of the L2 professionals in the literature (Alali, 2019; Bausser, 2000; Du, 2020), Anastasia's initial writing difficulties were due largely to differences between the structures of her L1 and English. Negative transfer can also occur when words or expressions in one language cannot be literally translated into another. Marina, Anastasia, and Carlos reported occasional challenges resulting from translation or structural errors.

Understanding spoken instructions. Another challenge that was absent from the selected literature was the ability to understand verbal instructions. Anastasia reported a need to occasionally seek clarification of spoken instructions delivered in different English accents. This difficulty, relating to the intertextual nature of workplace writing (Bremner, 2008; Fraiberg, 2013, 2018; Gibb, 2015; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002), illustrates how various literacies (e.g., instructions delivered during a verbal discussion) may need to be drawn upon during the writing process.

Vocabulary issues. Consistent with the literature (Alali, 2019; Bremner, 2012; Du, 2020; Duff et al., 2000; Faez, 2010; Hu & Gonzales, 2020; Machili, 2014), the five participants indicated that vocabulary occasionally posed challenges for them; however, they had found ways to cope effectively with this issue, as the later discussion of strategies will show.

Culturally Based Challenges

Four challenges reported by the participants in this study were deemed to be culturally based. The challenge that most identified with the literature findings (Angouri & Harwood, 2008; Artemeva, 1998; Knoch et al., 2016) was Marina's acknowledgment of her need to learn to write with a less aggressive tone, "because different countries, different cultures" (Marina). The other three challenges identified as culturally based were associated with receiving feedback from "polite" Canadian co-workers, as reported by Marina and Carlos, and Victor's observation of the challenge generally faced by adults adapting to a different culture and new practices.

Social Challenges

Due to the social nature of workplace writing (Du, 2020; Duff et al., 2000; Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999), conflict is sometimes inevitable. For instance, tension may arise when employees with stronger writing skills are asked to assist other staff members who were hired specifically to perform certain writing tasks (Machili, 2014). Hu and Hoare (2017) surmised that employees with writing difficulties could potentially increase the workload of their colleagues. Moreover, Machili (2014) suggested that "gatekeeping" actions (p. 122) sometimes deliberately taken by more experienced staff can undermine the efforts of novice employees to develop necessary skills. Roberts (2010) further stated that "the deliberate noncontact of some groups in relation to others both limit opportunities for socialization and actively construct resistances to it" (p. 217).

Two social challenges were reported by the participants. Victor expressed feeling unwelcome to seek support from L1 professionals when needed. It is not certain whether his experiences were caused by

legitimate efforts at “gatekeeping” (Machili, 2014, p. 122) or by actual attempts to “limit opportunities for socialization and actively construct resistances to it” (Roberts, 2010, p. 217). Marina lamented that her colleagues did not volunteer input on her writing and indicated that she lacked the confidence to seek feedback: “I was shy because my boss said that working hours are for work, not anything else” (Marina).

Workplace Writing Strategies

Of the various strategies reported in the selected literature for performing workplace writing tasks and developing workplace writing skills, the following were the most relevant to the experiences of the participants in this study.

General Strategies

Applying and seeking feedback. The benefits of feedback were reported in several studies (Apelman, 2010; Arkoudis et al., 2009; Bremner, 2012; Du, 2020; Hu & Gonzales, 2020; Knoch et al., 2016; Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999). The participants generally viewed feedback as a critical factor in the improvement of their writing skills. Due to working alone at night, Victor did not have the option to seek input, but he still mentioned the value of consulting coworkers for feedback. Although Sue perceived seeking feedback to be a possible indication of incompetence, she acknowledged that her managers were willing to help if approached for support. Carlos and Anastasia seemed to have made it a practice to actively seek feedback on their writing. Carlos appreciated the feedback provided by his peers, and Anastasia highly valued the correction she received from her managers.

Co-writing. This practice typically involves senior employees assisting and guiding newly hired employees (Apelman, 2010; Hu & Hoare, 2017; Knoch et al., 2016; Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999). Anastasia recognized that co-writing (mentoring by her managers) enabled her to cope effectively with writing demands. Co-writing was also seen as instrumental in her development of workplace writing skills in English.

Minimizing writing. All of the participants appeared to appreciate the opportunity to communicate occasionally using digital messaging tools, one way of minimizing or simplifying writing, according to Alali (2019). Carlos reported that, in an effort to prevent errors, he tended to avoid writing long paragraphs, preferring to write short texts with bullet points whenever possible. At the same time, he accepted that writing was an essential skill for his role and could not be avoided altogether.

Researching and organizing writing. During the think-aloud activity, all of the participants verbally outlined the various parts of their selected writing task (e.g., start, middle, and end) and indicated how they might proceed in real life, from the beginning to the end of the task, including researching for structure and content if needed. All reported that some form of research would usually be the first step in the process of carrying out their selected task. This might include seeking information, templates, or samples of writing to aid in the writing process. Like many of the other strategies here, researching is a typical first step for various forms of writing and for writers in general.

Thinking in English, translanguaging, and translation. The literature reported the use of translation or translanguaging techniques, that is, the ability to leverage other languages (Alali, 2019; Fraiberg, 2013, 2018; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002). Of all the participants, Marina and Anastasia appeared to rely the most heavily on digital translation tools (e.g., Google Translate) to translate from their L1 to English. Perhaps by

necessity due to working independently without access to peer feedback, Victor had developed the habit of writing his initial drafts in English, then using Google Translate to translate from English to his L1, thus verifying whether the texts composed in English carried the same meaning in his native language, and making any necessary adjustments afterward:

I write my idea in English, I'm not using Google Translate to translate and being lazy about what I want to say, but I write down the message, the draft in English and I use the tool, I mean Google Translate tool, to see if what I'm supposed to be saying in [my L1] comes with me.... (Victor)

Technology-Based Strategies

Through data gathered from the interview and the think-aloud, 24 technology-based strategies were identified relative to the use of technology for research, translation, and vocabulary purposes. These strategies involved the use of the Google search engine, Google Translate, Microsoft applications (spell check features), Grammarly, thesaurus.com, and online dictionaries. All of the participants indicated that they regularly used the Google search engine, and all, except Sue, reported using Google Translate. Apart from occasional translation errors (Marina) and the challenge of taking minutes during virtual meetings (Carlos), technology did not appear to pose challenges for the participants. Instant messaging tools such as WhatsApp, used by most of the participants for work purposes, were generally described as quick and easy means of communication (Victor) due to the use of short sentences and emoticons (Carlos).

Strategies Absent from Findings

Three strategies reported in the literature review were absent from the findings of the data analysis: (a) performing low-stakes or less demanding tasks, which allows developing writers time to become stronger writers (Angouri & Harwood, 2008; Apeiman, 2010; Bremner, 2012); (b) repetition of tasks, allowing newly hired employees to learn and retain new vocabulary and develop confidence (Parks & Maguire, 1999); and (c) workplace support initiatives/programs such as on-site or external training or dedicated editorial/writing services to aid the participants in the writing process (Alali, 2019; Apeiman, 2010; Arkoudis et al., 2009; Knoch et al., 2016; Machili, 2014). The participants did not indicate that these items had played a role in their workplace writing experiences. The option to perform low-stakes tasks depends largely on employees' roles and levels of responsibility, and repetition of writing tasks is the usual practice for many workplace writers. However, it is interesting that, apart from the assistance provided by colleagues, none of the participants reported the availability of workplace support initiatives despite these being generally viewed as a valuable means of support for L2 professionals (Alali, 2019; Apeiman, 2010; Arkoudis et al., 2009; Knoch et al., 2016).

Findings from Extended Analysis

Three factors were determined to be central to the development of the participants' workplace writing skills: motivation, awareness of the role of self, and awareness of the role of others (see Figure 1).

Motivation

While one cannot know for certain the factors that accounted for the apparent motivation of the participants (apart from the need to write for work-related purposes), the data suggest that they were strongly committed to further developing their workplace writing skills. Bandura (1989) stated, "People's self-efficacy beliefs determine their level of motivation, as reflected in how much effort they will exert in an endeavor and how long they will persevere in the face of obstacles" (p. 1176). Regarding self-efficacy, Kohn (2015) further stated, "A belief that one belongs in the workplace and can achieve success is highly important to workplace learning and writing" (p. 172). According to Dörnyei (1998), "high motivation can make up for considerable deficiencies both in one's language aptitude and learning conditions" (p. 117). Norton Peirce (1995) asserted that motivation is a complex matter which has origins in the field of social psychology and suggested that SLA researchers consider the notion of *investment* instead.

Figure 1
Key Factors in the Development of Workplace Writing Skills



Awareness of the Role of Self

As suggested by Bremner (2012), learning is most likely to occur when newcomers to a workplace are able to observe, analyze, and reflect on the workplace culture and its practices to gain understanding and to identify opportunities to apply relevant concepts from prior learning. This is closely related to the concept of agency (Bandura, 1989), for example, taking initiative to seek support, as shown in the studies of interns and newly hired graduates in Australia (Arkoudis et al., 2009) and francophone nurses in Montreal (Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999). The literature provides additional examples of other initiatives taken by L2 professionals outside of working hours to improve their writing, such as pursuing external training on their own initiative (Machili, 2014) and consulting occupation-specific books and articles to better grasp technical terms and their appropriate usage (Apelman, 2010). Similarly, the five participants in this study had found various ways to develop their skills further, within and beyond the workplace, such as reading workplace and other materials, taking courses, expanding their vocabulary and knowledge, and practicing writing on their own time.

Awareness of the Role of Others

Concerning the development of workplace writing skills, the principles of socialization and situated learning are given considerable attention in the literature (Angouri & Harwood, 2008; Arkoudis et al., 2009; Bremner, 2012; Du, 2020; Duff et al., 2000; Knoch et al., 2016; Machili, 2014; Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999). Where novice employees are provided with opportunities to learn from others, they are more likely to learn the routines and policies of their workplace. However, even in the most accommodating workspaces, writing anxiety can lead to negative coping strategies, such as overrelying on the visual presentation of data or avoiding writing as much as possible, which in turn can hamper opportunities to learn from others and to receive valuable, constructive feedback (Du, 2020).

Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis posited that in low-anxiety contexts, motivated and self-confident language learners—that is, those with low affective filters and therefore open to input—are more likely to achieve language acquisition success. The literature indicates that a key factor in writing development is a supportive learning environment in which constructive feedback, input, and encouragement are provided at times of need (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Bremner, 2012; Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999). Parks and Maguire (1999) repeatedly referred to the opportunities provided to their subjects and the support they received as forms of scaffolding to aid their integration, and they observed that this support played a critical role in the development of their writing skills, not to mention the social pressure that all health-care professionals typically experience due to the implications of careless or negligent work.

Certainly, the participants in this study were aware of the role that others played in the development of their writing skills. Even those who lacked access to support, like Marina and Victor, appeared to value it highly. Although they all may have experienced some anxiety at first, they gained confidence in their abilities over time and with practice. As Victor reported, "Before I was a bit scared due to my limitations, but after a while.... Right now, I feel kind of comfortable with it" (Victor). (See Appendix C for outcomes.)

Summary and Implications

This purpose of this study was to gain insight into the workplace writing experiences of five EAL professionals. The findings show that the participants could not have developed the confidence and ability to write effectively in isolation from other workplace practices. Moreover, the learning of workplace writing skills was usually facilitated when valuable input was provided by knowledgeable others on an ongoing basis. Some challenges, such as evaluating their writing, were harder to overcome than others, indicating that correction and translation tools are helpful only to a certain degree. For most of the participants, workplace writing instruction and support were not only essential to easing their integration into English workspaces but also a long-term need. The findings also show that the participants used various strategies to cope with the challenges they faced while performing various workplace writing tasks in English. Three factors appeared to account for the development of their workplace writing skills: motivation, an awareness of the role of self, and an awareness of the role of others. Despite reporting some anxiety during their earlier workplace writing experiences, the participants indicated that they had gained confidence in their abilities over time, with practice.

Implications for Language Training

The literature on L2 workplace writing offers an abundance of pedagogical recommendations, many of which emphasize strategies aimed at equipping developing writers to seek out their own workplace mentors and be agents of their own learning in English-dominant workplaces. Many of these recommendations are already being implemented (Derwing & Waugh, 2012; Drolet et al., 2014). Such training proved beneficial to the five participants, most of whom indicated that other forms of instruction had not prepared them to write for work-related purposes.

Learners would further benefit from training on the efficient use of technology for composing and for evaluating their writing for errors, to the extent that digital tools can be leveraged for the latter. A few recommendations include (a) training in the use of search engine tools (e.g., Google) to check portions of text for errors and to find collocations or common turns of phrase; (b) instruction in the use of spelling/grammar check (revision) tools in word-processing applications; and (c) guidance in the use of auto-correction features in email and instant messaging. To further empower L2 professionals, especially in EAL contexts, writing instruction should also include translanguaging practices, including the effective use of translation tools like Google Translate. El Mahmoud and Galante (2020) offer suggestions on how to incorporate the use of additional languages into writing instruction. Ideas on developing multimodal writing skills and recommendations for teaching collaborative writing skills with tools like Google Docs can be found in Godwin-Jones (2018). Additionally, IEPs who are accustomed to hierarchical work settings should be prepared to receive guidance from all skilled co-workers, regardless of the role and level of responsibility of the latter (Freedman & Adam, 1996).

The effectiveness of such training depends to some degree on the practical knowledge and experiences of instructors and the extent to which they are perceived to be knowledgeable about real-life workplace writing practices by the professionals they serve. Some language training programs already have arrangements in place to provide learners with insight from the perspective of sector-specific experts. Those that do not should strongly consider doing so, with the objective of providing program participants with insight into authentic workplace writing practices. In terms of traditional postsecondary education, institutions might require some form of workplace preparation training, provided by business communication experts, for all students, L1 and L2, prior to internships or graduation.

Lastly, workplace language training programs and mentoring partnerships between education providers and employers, both of which already exist, sometimes in the form of co-op placements, offer a

means of gaining the skills to meet workplace writing demands. More of these arrangements are needed. Job-shadowing opportunities may be another option, if they can be arranged in spite of confidentiality concerns.

Implications for Employers

As workplaces are increasingly being recognized as official places of learning, and as the need is seen for the development of a workplace pedagogy (Billett & Choy, 2013), the time has come for more employers in EAL contexts to provide ongoing language support to L2 professionals. This is especially true as organizations become more linguistically diverse due to migration flows influenced by globalization (Roberts, 2010). These initiatives are already provided by some employers, but usually on a short-term basis. What seems clear is that supporting the writing needs of EAL workers should be a joint, long-term effort between employers and training providers. At the very least, more employers in EAL contexts might consider sensitizing skilled writers to the needs of novice employees, especially those for whom English is an additional language, and proactively arranging co-writing or mentoring opportunities. While some of the participants' employers took an active role in this regard, others appeared to be less forthcoming, possibly unaware of the need for such support or unsure what form it should take (Drolet et al., 2014).

Attention to workplace writing issues is generally awarded low priority by employers due to time constraints and other factors (Davies & Birbili, 2000; Lentz, 2013). However, Lentz (2013) found that employees were incentivized to write well when their employers placed a high value on writing, which was evident in the provision and sometimes the requirement of writing training for all staff.

In conclusion, preparing EAL professionals to effectively meet workplace writing expectations requires active partnerships between training providers and employers. While the participants in this study proved themselves capable of learning to cope effectively with workplace writing demands over time, even in the absence of assistance, workplace writing support would likely have reduced their learning curve (Leki et al., 2008; Li, 2000; Roberts, 2010) and eased their integration into English workspaces.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to the workplace writing experiences of other EAL professionals due to the small number of participants. Furthermore, the participants all considered themselves to be good or fairly good writers in their L1. As this was the case, the data contained few diverse examples of challenges, strategies, and technology use. The participants likely did not experience the same challenges or feel the need to use strategies that might be employed by less capable L2 writers. In addition, to get a clear understanding of what people actually do at work, it is better to observe them in their workplaces (Roberts, 2010). However, even with approval to conduct research in the participants' places of work, this may not have been possible due to time constraints and due to the pandemic that coincided with the study.

Future Research

This study has contributed to the need for additional research on the workplace writing experiences of EAL professionals with developing workplace writing skills. The call for more studies in this area is not new,

but much prior research has been primarily pedagogical in focus (Parks, 2016). To add to existing suggestions of a pedagogical nature, it would be valuable to explore the ways in which instructors prepare L2 professionals to communicate effectively in real-world writing tasks and equip them to evaluate their writing using technology-based learning activities and translanguaging practices. Furthermore, it would be useful to know what measures instructors can take, if any, to assess for learning transfer (Brent, 2011; James, 2006), thus facilitating the integration of L2 professionals and ensuring greater success. Further research efforts might focus on the collaboration between language-training providers and workplace writing experts to ensure that language instruction holds real-world value for learners.

With respect to further studies in work settings, the findings of research in bilingual (English/French) workspaces in Canada, where writing and other workplace practices are performed in both of the country's official languages, would be especially enlightening. There also remains a need for more research on technology use for workplace writing purposes, particularly more dynamic forms of computer-mediated communication like web chat, which may present unique challenges for L2 professionals with developing workplace writing skills. Finally, since employers are viewed as playing a key part in the settlement process, there is an increasing need for more research focused on their role in the effective integration of immigrant professionals in EAL workspaces. Future endeavours might additionally consider the role of proficient L1 and L2 colleagues in EAL work settings and the extent to which their actions hinder or aid the development of L2 professionals' workplace writing skills and their integration in EAL work settings.

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The Author

For over 15 years, Cheryl John has taught general, business, and academic English to adult learners in the Toronto area. Her pedagogical experience is complemented by additional experience gained through diverse non-teaching roles throughout her working life. Inspired by the writing challenges of English language learners in an employment preparation program where she provided language training for seven years, Cheryl recently completed a Master of Arts in Education, which featured a thesis exploring the workplace writing experiences of English learners in English-dominant workspaces.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

- 1) What experience do you have performing workplace writing tasks in your first language?
- 2) What experience do you have performing workplace writing tasks in English?
- 3) What strategies have you used to perform workplace writing tasks in English?
- 4) In what ways have you used technology to perform workplace writing tasks?
- 5) What has helped you to develop your workplace writing skills? (if needed, suggest examples: workplace experience, mentoring, business English classes or language training programs)
- 6) What recommendations do you have for other ESL professionals to improve their workplace writing skills prior to employment?
- 7) What recommendations do you have for other ESL professionals to improve their professional writing skills after finding employment?

Appendix B: Think-Aloud Activity

Choose one of the scenarios. Reflect on the steps that you would be most likely to take during the writing process (before, during, and after writing). You do not need to write anything, but if you think it would be helpful, you may take some notes.

- 1) You have been asked to write a memo for the staff in your department.
- 2) You are writing a reply email to a potential customer who has enquired about a product or service.
- 3) You are writing an external email to a client or customer.

- 4) You have been asked to write a short report on the professional development options available to staff in your department or company.
- 5) You have been asked to review a company that supplies products or services to your company or department, to determine whether there is a more cost-effective option.
- 6) You are required to take the minutes at an important staff meeting.
- 7) You have been asked to identify potential suppliers of a new service or product, and prepare a report comparing the pros and cons of each company.
- 8) You want to inform your boss about an external PD/training opportunity and inquire about funding to attend the training.

Appendix C: Outcomes of Developed Workplace Writing Skills

Outcomes	Examples of relevant comments
Confidence in writing skills (increased comfort level)	<p>"...it took me about, like, three to five years to feel comfortable to write in English, professionally." (Anastasia, I)</p> <p>"Personally, at some point I was able to feel that [I was gaining confidence]. I know that I still have to work harder on it, but now things are different." (Victor, F)</p>
Increased confidence in other L2 skills	<p>"Read whatever you come across, any document that is work-related. You will improve a lot your vocabulary. You will improve a lot your writing skills and even when you speak, because you are going to use the vocabulary wherever you work." (Carlos, I)</p>
Achievement of communicative goals	<p>"...I think [my strategies are] working. I haven't received any emails saying can you be more explicit..." (Victor, TA)</p> <p>"...I'm good--- I don't have mistakes and my managers are happy with the reports that I provide to them." (Anastasia, I)</p> <p>"So during my writing I need to make sure that what I have replied will meet their needs, that I've answered all their questions...because most of the time they have multiple questions... So to make sure everything is good, that it's good enough for them to think about it and make decisions." (Sue, TA)</p>
Sense of belonging ("fit")	<p>"[Writing well] is tremendously important. To properly communicate, inform, make awareness, let people know. But most importantly to be part of a team, to 'fit' at work and in any other social group." (Victor, F)</p>
Ability to compete with NS	<p>"Language maybe is our weakness and we need to work [at] it in order to overcome it, but we need to show our strengths in order to try to balance and be able to compete in the workplace." (Carlos, F)</p>

Note. I=Interview, TA=Think-aloud, F=Follow-up