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The Importance of English Writing Skills in the International Workplace

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss the multifaceted role of English writing in the international workplace. Drawing upon previous research, we point out that English, as the main lingua franca, supports a variety of writing practices in the workplace, and so it presents both significant value and challenges for internationally operating individuals and organizations. In the initial sections of the paper, we review the importance and frequency of the English writing activities that facilitate communication and collaboration in the international workplace. We conclude this discussion by presenting three implications of good writing practices in the workplace for individuals and organizations.

Keywords: international workplace, English writing skills, workplace writing tasks, business English as lingua franca, written communication

The ability to write effectively is an important workplace skill across professions and business sectors. In general, writing serves as a core medium for communication and activity in the workplace—it maintains workplace operations that range from everyday in-house staff communication to high-stakes negotiation procedures with clients. Nearly all job postings advertise the so-called soft skills in a job position, frequently detailing descriptions such as “strong command in writing skills” or “excellent written communication skills” under preferred requirements (Messum et al., 2016).

On this note, workplace writing is perceived as a high-stakes activity, which has implications for all involved parties, including the organization as a whole. A poorly constructed e-mail may have cascading effects, such as causing a colleague to miss an important meeting or, in more extreme cases, jeopardizing a growing partnership with a new business lead (Manning, 2016). Writing is often a complex activity in the professional sphere—it involves a communicative purpose (such as persuasion) that needs to be tailored to an audience (Machili, 2014), which underscores the particular significance of the accessibility of the content and language used by a writer.

The prominence placed on writing in the workplace has intensified in the international business environment, where English is often used as the language of communication (Louhiala-Salminen, 2009). With business expanding in the international sphere (Tenzer et al., 2017), professionals are now tasked with working in concert with not only their local colleagues, but also their collaborators from different parts of the world. In this context, professionals, particularly those who use business English as lingua franca¹ (hereafter BELF) (Louhiala-Salminen, 2009), experience a wide variation in business interactions as well as the types, functions, and structure of documents they need to produce (Hyland, 2013). This evolution in the linguistic landscape in the workplace, in addition to the general complexities inherent in workplace writing, underscores the need for business decision-makers and job candidates alike to be aware of the importance of English writing skills in the current business environment.

Building upon this context, in this paper, we outline in more detail why writing, particularly writing that involves the use of BELF, has been and continues to be a conduit for

international business activities. Drawing upon the insights and business practices documented in previous research, we further lay out the implications that good English writing practices have for different stakeholders involved in the process. Ultimately, we aim to suggest a systematic way for business professionals to think about the relevance and importance of English writing activities in an international business context, as well as the skills required to excel in these activities.

The Value of English Writing Skills in the International Workplace

Given the dominant role of BELF in the international workplace, there is a need to effectively *communicate* and *compose* in English (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Peirson-Smith et al., 2010). In this section, we briefly summarize research that has surveyed professionals' perceived importance of English writing skills. We then touch upon two strands of research findings as they pertain to English writing in the workplace: first, English writing and business communication, and second, English writing in standardized professional documents.

English Writing Skills Are Perceived To Be Important

Survey research has shown that professionals believe writing skills are important in the international workplace. For instance, in two separate studies, Schmidgall and Powers (2020a, 2020b) surveyed a total of 200 professionals (100 in each study) who were employed in a variety of industries and regions where English is used as the official working language. Close to 80% of the respondents in each study indicated that English writing skills were “important” or “very important” in their workplace. Similarly, Kim (2019) surveyed 148 Korean professionals working in multinational corporations and found that workplace tasks involving English writing skills were rated as the most, if not moderately, important of all 16 surveyed tasks. These included tasks such as writing e-mails, business reports, and contracts in English. These findings accord with Moore et al. (2015), in which 83% of the 71 surveyed employers indicated that English writing skills were either “important” (38%) or “very important” (45%) in the workplace routines of early-career professionals.

It is worth noting that while writing skills are typically rated as important, professionals do not necessarily prioritize writing over other language skills (i.e., reading, speaking, listening).

On the one hand, reading and writing skills in English tend to be collectively perceived as essential, foundational workplace language competencies (Kassim & Ali, 2010; Lung, 2014; Spence & Liu, 2013). On the other hand, prioritization of specific skills may vary widely within and across organizational contexts and professions. For instance, a survey of 788 Japanese graduates by Tartan et al. (2014) suggested an industry-specific demand in the usage of English skills in the workplace. While “speaking in English with colleagues” was highly valued in industries such as logistics and storage (where spoken correspondence is generally highly valued), professionals working in sectors such as finance and insurance and trading (where record keeping and documentation is vital) indicated a high demand for reading and writing skills in English.

Thus, while English writing skills appear to be valued by professionals in the international workplace, industries and professions vary in terms of their English needs and use of specific English skills. It is thus necessary to consider that individual professionals or organizations may vary in the way they understand why English writing skills are important or the outcomes associated with English writing skills.

English Writing Facilitates Business Communication

The use of English in written correspondence has allowed both external and internal business communication to become more straightforward and direct (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). Business professionals frequently encounter the challenge of dealing with multinational business counterparts and colleagues who differ in multiple ways in how they interpret and process written communication. Business communication is also characterized by its immediacy (Crystal, 2000); in most cases, an instant answer is expected of business contacts (Carrió-Pastor & Muñiz Calderón, 2012). In this environment, the directness (i.e., explicitness and clarity in the message) that English written communication conveys appears to be of high practical value (Fairbrother, 2018; Rogers, 2014).

For example, researchers interviewed 27 business professionals situated in the Nordic region about their perceptions of English as the language of work (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). When professionals were asked to describe how they communicate with their international correspondents, both Dutch- and Finnish-speaking employees prioritized clarity in

conveying their message. More precisely, for these professionals, the level of directness appropriate for written communication was intertwined with the time-sensitive nature of business communication. In order to avoid multiple chains of follow-ups and double-checking the initial message, they reported using “simplified English” in communication, which was further characterized as “explicit (unambiguous), simple (without complex words or structures), and compact (without unnecessary words, repetition)” (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010, pp. 21–22). These instances also show that professionals were making substantial effort toward cooperation and collaboration to facilitate their interactants’ understanding of the initial message.

Using English in written communication, particularly within an organization, may also have symbolic and practical importance in facilitating communication and information transfer within and across cross-border units and multinational colleagues (Tienari, 2009). One dramatic example of this point occurred when researchers documented the aftermath of the switch of corporate languages as a result of a Swedish–Finnish bank merger (Vaara et al., 2005). In a series of interviews, Finnish monolingual employees described how they were initially disempowered in internal communication under the policy of Swedish as the corporate language. They depicted instances when they were deprived of direct engagement with management and colleagues, including being excluded in chains of communication and, at times, important meetings. This perception changed when the company changed its language policy to English a few years later. Finnish-speaking employees reported a shift in the balance of power dynamics that had been inherent in internal communication, which they felt improved professional equality vis-à-vis their Swedish colleagues and supervisors.

The practical and symbolic benefits of English written communication may involve trade-offs. Increasing the directness in written messages could be “face-threatening” to interactants with different cultural values and orientations toward communication (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005), and power dynamics may still exist due to the wide variation in professionals’ English proficiency (Chew, 2005). However, there is little question as to whether English written communication is a viable option among competing BELF alternatives (e.g.,

Chinese; Kubota, 2013), given how English functions as the most prevailing BELF for operating business at a global scale (Nickerson, 2005).

English Writing Standardizes Professional Workplace Documents

Another practical need for BELF writing arises from the increasing standardization of workplace documents in choices of language, content, and formats (Jorgensen, 2005). As international organizations largely depend upon export and operations, professionals are tasked with interpreting and at times constructing highly contextualized, legislative documents (e.g., contracts, agreements, annual reports). These specialized genres of documents are often distinctive in stylistic features and formal register of English, which often causes challenges for professionals who are unfamiliar with western rhetorical traditions (M. Y. Park et al., 1998). Consequently, effective writing in this context requires a systematic effort to internalize the inherent rules of a given genre, which may require years of on-the-job experience (Moore & Morton, 2017). It is also worth noting that in some business contexts (e.g., accounting, finance), the need to conform to restrictions in producing professional texts in English is imperative insofar as failing to do so may impose additional legal and business costs (Passera et al., 2017).

English is also widely used for public relations purposes as international organizations strive to access a global audience and clientele. This is motivated by the potential of English-medium communication to reach the largest possible global audience (Planken et al., 2010). Against this backdrop, print advertising and reporting in English has become an international norm in order to make company information globally accessible. For instance, most multinational corporations standardize promotional texts such as advertisements and annual reports in an English version in order to serve potential investors and foreign board members with diversified nationalities (De Groot et al., 2015).

The Key Workplace Tasks Where English Writing Skills Are Used

Researchers have been aware of the importance of writing skills for business operations for decades (Cassady & Wasson, 1994; Evans & Green, 2003) and sought to identify the types and frequency of writing practices used in workplaces across the world. This research is interdisciplinary and often surveys professionals in identifying their English language and

communication needs in the workplace (Lung, 2014). In this section, we summarize the research findings on the kinds of English writing activities commonly identified by workplace professionals.

Individuals Use English Writing Skills for Everyday Communicative Tasks

A robust finding from survey research of English writing in the workplace is that English writing skills fuel the day-to-day corresponding practices of business professionals (Qing, 2016). Much of the evidence for this finding comes from the accounts of professionals employed in a wide spectrum of professions and industries, ranging from general business sectors such as engineering and commerce (Cho, 2011; Evans, 2012; Kim, 2019; Rajprasit & Hemchua, 2015; Spence & Liu, 2013) to more specialized industries such as hospitality (Lung, 2014) and textile businesses (Li So-mui & Mead, 2000). This general finding from research with professionals across different industries is in part reflective of their use of English for a variety of genres of correspondence (e.g., e-mails, fax, business letters). With the advancement of technology and the fast-paced nature of the globalized communication, e-mail, in particular, has been identified as a dominant channel for business communication (Evans, 2012).

Research evidence has suggested that e-mail writing in English is especially common in Asian-Pacific business contexts where major multinational organizations are located (J. S.-Y. Park, 2011). In a survey of Thai professionals, Hiranburana (2017) reported that about 97% of those surveyed indicated that writing e-mails in English was the task they carried out most frequently. Spence and Liu (2013) surveyed process integration engineers in Taiwan's high-tech industry and found that about 98% of them were engaging in writing e-mails in English either daily or at least two to three times a week. Cho (2011) also reported a relatively high frequency of English e-mail use based on a survey of Korean professionals. Cho found that on a daily basis, professionals reported reading through 63 incoming e-mails from their overseas associates and supervisors and writing 19 e-mails in English.

Research focused on the details of day-to-day activities of professionals in the international workplace has reached similar conclusions about the frequency and importance of writing e-mails in English. Evans (2012) traced a typical work week of four individuals from different professions in Hong Kong, who interchangeably used both their first language

(Cantonese Chinese) and English for internal and external correspondence. Through a self-report checklist, respondents indicated that they dealt with reading a massive volume of e-mail messages per week (e.g., 300–400) in both working languages. However, a stark difference was found in how they composed outgoing messages. For instance, Don, a compliance manager of a Chinese bank, spent a higher proportion of his time responding to incoming e-mails in English for both internal and external counterparts (107 minutes and 92 minutes, respectively) than he would in Chinese (47 minutes and 0 minutes respectively). In addition, the volume of outgoing messages was more profound in Don's correspondence in English (29 outgoing e-mails in response to 55 incoming e-mails) than in Chinese (17 outgoing e-mails in response to 89 incoming e-mails). These findings indicate that written business correspondence, at least for these professionals, was not only frequent, but also centralized in English.

Overall, research generally has indicated that English writing skills facilitate correspondence in the international workplace. In particular, e-mail continues to be the dominant form of written workplace communication, channeling the flow of activities and interaction within and across professions and industries.

Teams Collaborate Through the Medium of Written English

Team collaboration is integral to the writing practices in the contemporary workplace (Bremner, 2010). Although the specific dynamics of collaboration differ across organizations and industries, workplace collaborative writing includes “all activity and communication, surrounding the construction of texts by multiple contributors” (Bremner et al., 2014, p. 151). In other words, collaborative writing involves not only multiple authors creating text, but also strategic negotiation and coordination of the editing and reviewing processes that facilitate a coherent, unified document.

Research in the domain of BELF has only recently focused on the practices of non-English-speaking professionals and how they collaborate during the writing process. In an exemplary study, researchers interviewed 16 executives working in the public relations industry in Hong Kong where English is used for creating promotional texts within a team setting (Peirson-Smith et al., 2010). The executives collectively described a typical pattern of collaboration within teams, creating two-person teams by pairing a more experienced writer

with a less experienced one. In this case, each writer would take on a different role. For example, the less experienced writer would be tasked with doing the ground work of translating, gathering materials, and often writing a first draft, while the more experienced one would proofread and finalize the written piece. Respondents perceived this relationship to be not a solely hierarchal one; in order to maximize creative collaboration to the fullest, executives believed it was vital to incorporate effective mentoring/scaffolding for the less experienced member in the writing process.

Another implication of Peirson-Smith et al.'s (2010) study is that collaborative writing can be very challenging in the context of the international workplace. For instance, a few native-English-speaking expatriates taking the role of managers noted that language becomes a barrier for successful collaboration among employees when English proficiency is insufficient. This finding highlights the additional challenges that professionals with limited English writing skills may face both in functioning and in growing their careers within an organizational context that promotes or requires team collaboration.

To summarize, research has suggested collaborative writing is a frequently occurring, and at times, dominant practice in the globalized workplace (Bhatia & Bremner, 2014). Because of the possibility of language-specific issues hindering the collaborative process, employees and organizations should consider the importance of collaborative writing in their context and the implications for professionals with limited English proficiency.

Key implications of English Writing Skills in the International Workplace

In the previous sections, we focused on research related to the importance and frequency of workplace English writing activities. Based on this research, we concluded that workplace English writing can facilitate various facets of international business operations such as communication and collaboration among professionals. In this section, we present three implications of good writing practices in the workplace. Some of these practices have immediate, practical concerns for individual professionals, while others have longer term ramifications for an organization as a whole.

Implications for Organizations

While English writing plays a key role in the advancement of one's professional career in the international workplace setting (Qing, 2016), it is also in the interest of the organization and the fulfillment of its business objectives. As core business assets, professional texts produced in the workplace define and extend the organization's goals and mission. Writing is a powerful and influential activity, which directly dictates the success or failure of essential operations.

Research has produced dramatic yet realistic accounts of how miscommunication emanating from less-than-desirable English writing practices of professionals can have a damaging effect on a company's reputation. Manning (2016) analyzed threads of e-mail communication among three Korean professionals employed in a small-to-medium enterprise (SME) and their overseas suppliers and associates. In general, all examined professionals experienced varying degrees of difficulty in executing written communication in English. In most cases, these difficulties involved a series of routine mishaps stemming from awkward choices of technical terms or phrases, which, fortunately, did not seem to cause major comprehension issues for the overseas recipients. One critical incident, however, almost jeopardized a multi-million-dollar negotiation process with a new supplier. "Tom,"² an employee who had relatively less developed English writing skills, copied an incorrect sample of an old e-mail and sent it to a representative without tailoring the contents to accord with the negotiation in process. Being the head of the company's research and development, Tom rarely needed to be in direct contact with a supplier as part of his everyday work. However, because the organization was understaffed with individuals competent enough to write business correspondence (which is the reality of most financially ill-equipped SMEs), Tom had to step up on this occasion and, unfortunately, was unprepared. Consequently, the alarmed recipient contacted the CEO of Tom's organization, expressed a distrust in the way the company handled external communication, and questioned the prospect of engaging in further business with the firm.

Although damaging incidents due to insufficient English writing skills may occur less frequently in larger organizations equipped with a multilingual workforce, the underlying challenges of writing and communicating in English may resonate in many globalized

workplaces where English is used as a medium to communicate and maintain the company brand. In this context, it is possible that poorly shaped texts in the working language may unintentionally subvert organizational efforts by undermining important business relationships and ultimately financial gains.

Workplace writing is not only vital to develop and sustain the external credibility of an organization, it is also a tool to maintain internal communication within an organization. Internal communication is defined as “all formal and informal communication taking place internally at all levels of an organization” (Kalla, 2005, p. 306), spanning the managerial or corporate-wide communication functions of an organization.

In general, international workplace environments benefit from knowledge sharing between all associated units. However, research has suggested that the benefits of knowledge sharing are particularly vulnerable to how information is altered as it flows within and across employees and units, including overseas subsidiaries. Welch et al. (2005) pointed out that lack of clarity in written communication undermines the information flow between a company headquarters and its subsidiaries. Lack of clarity may have a cascading effect on subsidiary staff wherein incoming messages and relevant information sent to them are discarded. When written English becomes a barrier of essential communication, organizations may try to improve communication by translating the written English text to a local language. However, this practice may result in an enhanced risk of altering features of the intended message each time a text is translated, which can cause or increase inequalities and inaccuracies in knowledge or information sharing among cross-border branches and subsidiaries (Fai & Piekkari, 2003).

From a broader perspective, internal communication can be viewed as a vehicle for promoting the well-being of employees and the performance of the organization in the long haul (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012). This functionality specifically takes up an essential part of the cross-border contacts and managerial processes where a unified corporate language, such as English, coordinates important aspects of business operations.

Implications for Individual Professionals

Lastly, writing skills potentially make a big difference in how an individual is perceived and functions in an organization. In the broader corporate sphere, employers and business

representatives alike stress the importance of having a good grip on the so-called soft skills, namely, professional writing and written communication skills. However, what makes individuals stand out and present themselves professionally is not only bound to their broader communication skills, but also to their ability to adapt their writing to suit the demands of their immediate profession and organization.

Managers interviewed in Moore and Morton's (2017) study, for instance, suggested that a person "getting the job done" is one who is capable of recognizing "the specific circumstances and constraints that shape any writing episode (purpose, audience, etc.) in the workplace" (p. 603). In the public relations industry, this implied writing in simplified, plain language to communicate with stakeholders with varying backgrounds. For an environmental scientist, this meant possessing a range of writing skills to produce documents of varying degrees of formality and technicality. Writers who lacked the ability to orient text toward the targeted purpose or audience were poorly equipped to serve the exact needs of the job and were at risk of being conceived of as having a "deficiency" in writing and, ultimately, in managing their job responsibilities.

Challenges with written communication have implications for professionals whose working language is their second or foreign language, or specifically within the current discussion, English. For one, although on-the-job writing skills are prioritized and valued in general, non-English-speaking professionals may be in the midst of developing the basic foundations of English writing suitable for functioning in the workplace. Existing challenges may be exacerbated by specific organizational constraints. In SMEs, some professionals may lack the appropriate skill sets or organizational support for executing basic communications operations (e.g., Manning, 2016); in larger multinational organizations, some may be in an inferior position to their colleagues who are fluent in the working language (e.g., Vaara et al., 2005). In either environment, the professionals concerned may easily be overlooked, perceived as unqualified, or disempowered in managerial communication or mentoring opportunities (Peirson-Smith et al., 2010).

To address challenges with written communication in English in the international workplace, researchers encourage professionals to focus more on strategic use of the English

language, rather than attempting to master it or attain “native-like” competence (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2012). This strategic practice is characterized by foregrounding user comprehension of the content to “get the job done” (Rogers, 2014, p. 174). This involves professionals making appropriate use of “the general business-related vocabulary, the specific technical jargon” (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010, p. 18) commonly shared in the workplace community rather than focusing on grammatical or syntactical correctness while communicating. At the same time, professionals should conform to conventional communication attributes such as maintaining “clarity, brevity, directness, and politeness” in their messaging (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010, p. 31).

In addition, professionals should proactively seek ways to solidify and expand on their English writing repertoire in order to maintain their credibility within their profession and organization. As several studies have suggested, this practice includes taking full advantage of on-the-job language training and mentoring from senior staff and utilizing external resources where they become available (Moore & Morton, 2017; Peirson-Smith et al., 2010).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the multifaced role of English writing in the international workplace by drawing upon interdisciplinary accounts of business stakeholders and scholars. We have pointed out that English is often used as the main BELF in the globalized workplace and is evident in a variety of writing practices that have important outcomes for internationally operating individuals and organizations. We have touched upon the roles of English writing in facilitating business communication, standardizing specialized business documents, and enabling collaboration in a multifaced team environment.

For individuals and organizations who operate (or expect to operate) in a context where English writing skills have important outcomes, the next step is to consider the extent to which these skills have been adequately developed and how they can be enhanced. We consider this discussion to be an important stepping stone in helping professionals and organizations as a whole to reflect on their own context and to gain a deeper, more profound understanding of the complexities inherent in English-medium correspondence and, ultimately, to develop and maintain successful business operations in the globalized era (Piekkari et al., 2014).

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Notes

¹ *Lingua franca* is typically conceptualized as “a common language different from the parties’ native language, very often English” (Cuypers et al., 2015, p. 430). *Business English as lingua franca (BELF)* takes more of an inclusive view that English is “a neutral means of communication that frequently co-exists alongside other local languages” (Nickerson & Crawford Camiciottoli, 2013, p. 4), one that embraces interaction with native speakers of English (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010).

² Individuals were renamed to protect their identities.