

## **A Phenomenological Inquiry into ESL Workplace Writing Experiences**

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### **Abstract**

Workplace writing is a strand of intricate network of purposes, events, relationships, other texts, and readers. For workforces whose English is a second language (ESL), writing in the workplace demands them to understand the complex nature of workplace texts. Workplace writing is a complex process as it is situated within the dynamics of writers and texts. This study explores the complex workplace writing process through the empirical phenomenological approach. It sought to reach to an essence of the phenomenon through exploring the participants' lived experiences. 11 millennial generation workforce's experiences were gathered using the two-phase in-depth interviews and document analysis consisting of self-portraits and samples or workplace documentation. Their responses were analysed based on van Kaam's seven-step systematic thematic analysis. It was found that workplace writing revolved acquiring the workplace genre, a recurring process, transitions through learning and transitions to adapt to the complex social motive of the workplace. This study provides insights into education and professional preparation for specific writing.

**Keywords:** Workplace writing, genre, millennial generation, lived-experience, phenomenology

### **1. Introduction (Times New Roman 10 Bold)**

While many job ads often mention requirements for soft and hard skills, workers and employers alike sometimes disregard the importance of good writing in the workplace. According to a survey conducted on hiring managers and recruiters, writing (19%) is one of the 10 most in-demand hard skills on the market along with analytical skills (53%) and high-level IT skills (49%) that take up the first and second place (**Buffet, 2021**). This shows that writing as a hard skill continues to be the most sought-after skill that graduates, or workforces should acquire. English as a second language (ESL) writing is highly valuable in the workplace (**Ueasiriphan & Tangkiengsirisin, 2019**).

Workplace writing in ESL is one of the communication skills fundamental in the workplace. By acknowledging the changing of English demands in the interconnected economic, fluency in English

goes beyond the spoken context but a clear recognition on a variety of practices of the written English communication as well (Siti Zaidah et al., 2019). However, graduates often found themselves having the most problem with writing when compared with other skills despite its importance in their career and everyday situations (Yusuf et al., 2018). A severe issue with writing in English is that graduates are asserted to be under-prepared for real workplace writing tasks although the consequences of the weaknesses can be unfavourable by the stakeholders including employers and the graduates themselves (Knoch et al., 2016). Not only that, writing itself is considered a complex intellectual activity which requires the writer to stretch their cognitive ability (Sanford, 2012). Poor English writing proficiency among the fresh local graduates has become an alarming issue among employers though they are highly qualified (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012). Limited information exists on the nature of workplace writing practices despite these disputable issues (Moore & Morton, 2015). Thus, the study sought to understand the complex nature of ESL workplace writing as experienced by the staff that currently working in most workplaces around the world, the millennial staff.

## 2 Review of The Related Studies

### The Dynamic of Workplace Writing

An effective workplace writing must have rhetorical awareness in which determines the purpose, audience, stakeholders, and contexts of the target texts. The dynamic refers to the many aspects that affect a text and each comes with its character. For example, a process of negotiation may occur between writers and readers through exposure to the linguistics and rhetorical conventions of texts. Figure 1 depicts Matsuda's Dynamic Model of L2 Writing.

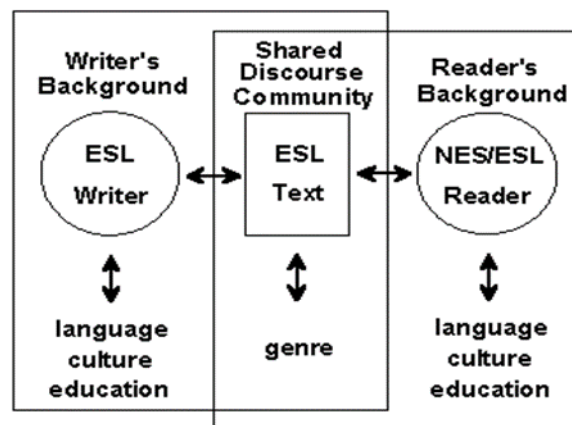


Figure 1 Matsuda's Dynamic Model of L2 Writing

Based on this framework, the elements of writer's background, reader's backgrounds and ESL text are three main areas of the investigation. Another aspect is the shared discourse community which contributes to the genre that is agreed-upon in the institution. This model is regarded as the space that encompasses a text. A discourse community is a community that has an agreed set of goals and a mechanism of communication among its members. It is placed at the intersection of the writer's and the reader's backgrounds (Manchon & Matsuda, 2016; Matsuda & Silva, 2005). In the present

study, the discourse community is regarded as workplace writing rhetoric that involves the genre or context that is influenced by the stakeholders or the reader's background and the writer's background. With regards to the background, apart from the language and culture, the writer's and reader's education are the contributing factors.

A writer in a discourse community shares one or more genres, and specific lexis with his/her readers and with other writers to communicate the community's aims. However, before the writer can use the genre effectively, she/he must obtain an appropriate degree of discursal expertise and relevant content which this study regards as transitions. The process of acquiring the genre happens to any new member of the community regardless of his/her cultural, linguistic, or educational background (**Yusuf et al., 2018**).

The writer's and reader's differing backgrounds and levels of discourse expertise can modify or construct a shared discourse community through their encounters. At this stage, the writer may negotiate his/her admission to the discourse community by growing accustomed to the shared conventions, and a reader can help expand the shared area by becoming familiar with the text. The text embodies differing levels of discourse expertise, experiences, and assumptions.

### **Second Language Workplace Writing as a Sociocultural Activity**

Sociocultural theory formed from the work of psychologist, Lev Vygotsky who believed that that individuals that a person interacts, and the culture at large contributes for integrating information on the individual level. He promoted the concept of "tools of the mind" that believed physical tools increase physical abilities and mental tools increase mental abilities that enable problem solving. On the other hand, the symbolic tools as emphasized by Vygotsky act as mediators adopted by individuals in the context of their sociocultural activities (**Kozulin et al., 2003**).

In the context of this study, L2 writing or workplace writing in English is a sociocultural activity that is mediated by the tools. There are two types mediation as underlined by Vygostky. Firstly, the mediation through human being. Writing is believed to be a social action. Vygostky (1978) sense that cognitive works interpersonally (**Dias et al., 2011**). Knowing in the workplace context is social and to know requires cognition. The source of cognitive functioning is socially shared. Secondly, the mediation from organized learning activity. In other words, both the tools assist individuals in completing tasks. Activity theories developed by **Cole (1996) and Engestrom (2001)** used the term "cultural tool" to refer to these two tools: physical and psychological tools (**Thompson, 2013**). In this study, tools are associated with the psychological and physical concepts that promote writing skills/cognitive development. These tools allow language users/ learners to utilize their mental functions, namely memory, attention, and sensation. As they attempt to do so, they will adapt effectively. From the Activity Theory that the foundation was laid down by Vygotsky, planning out a task or symbolically carry out the task rather than settle on upfront 'trial-and-error' can avoid or save individuals from pitfalls and dangers.

In this study, the sociocultural activities are referred to the professional community that the L2 writers work in. The activities of writing are influenced by the writers' social contexts and the contexts as a

result be shaped by the writing that occurs within them (**Schneider, 2002**). Thus, there is a special communication between what the community or the surrounding environment where the writing takes place with the writing activities. Activity theory views higher forms of human activity (e.g., writing) as mediated (**Leijten et al., 2014**) by culturally constructed material tools (e.g., stationery, technology devices) or psychological tools (e.g., language, concepts, scripts, schemas). The use of mediational resources allows individuals to master themselves and their surrounding environment, and conversely, to be shaped by the activity as well (**Yang, 2014**).

### **Community of practice**

In understanding workplace experiences, community of practice (COP) is another form of informal learning which involves peer-to-peer (**Hara, 2009**). It is a derivation of the work of Lave and Wenger (1993). In the present study, the particular community of practice is crucial to be looked into as to understand the communication norms especially with regards to interacting through writing to perform tasks (**Newton & Kusmierczyk, 2011**). It has a great significance in this research which aims to understand the norms of the workplace writing in the specific workplace. By investigating this aspect, the researcher is able to make sense of the intrinsic conditions of the lived experiences (or the existing knowledge) as it lays out the essential interpretation support (**Newton & Kusmierczyk, 2011; Warriner, 2010**).

As commonly known writing that is produced and practiced in university does not change into successful writing inside the work setting (**Dias et al., 2011**). A substantial number of scholars believe that learners learn to write when they have experienced the real tasks or on-the-job rather than in university (**Brown, 1988; Dias et al., 2011**). This is because learning or knowing is limited to context specific. What is beyond context will not be applied at the learning platform in the university because it also takes cognition to be an effective language user. According to Vygostky (1978), cognition is 'socially shared' which means the everyday activity and social interaction with the community helps strengthening writing skills. Thus, it could be implied that a second language (L2) writer continues to learn after their graduation, and it seems that they are gaining or strengthening their skills while working.

In order to further describe how individual L2 writers make progress from the first day they started working until they have developed a related skill; this research will view it from the community of practice. This concept is developed by Lave and Wenger's (1991). It refers to a group of people bound together by mutual expertise and desire for a common endeavour (**Pogner, 2012**). The term 'speech communities' is regularly used to describe people from the same social group. It is also an important notion to understand the ways in which social groups organize their linguistic repertoires though the members may not share the same language (**Romaine 2000**). The term refers to a group of people who share a set of norms and rules of use of language. In this study, the speech communities are the group of workers who share the same set of standards when handling language for work purposes especially those concern bilateral or multilateral communications. Lave and Wagner's work is of particular interest of this study because it principally denoted to training in the workplace and its concepts have been extensively applied to education (**Poverjuc, 2010**). The two are main elements that this study attempts to draw related discussions together and provide a closer scholarly dialogue. Community of

practice concept provides a valuable tool to explain the means by which workforce progresses from the day they started working until they are able to perform a satisfactory written task.

Lave and Wenger (1991) viewed learning in this context as learners (new workforce) aligning themselves to a particular community as they become more participative in its practices and adopt new identities. According to Wenger (1998) the newcomers must be allowed sufficient 'legitimacy' or granted rights to be treated as part of the community as only with this can all their preordained stumbling is transformed into learning. This standpoint reflects that the new workforces are likely to experience struggles to avoid dismissal, tensions, and exclusion. Therefore, they should be granted enough 'opportunities' to access shared knowledge, practices, and conventions (**Poverjuc, 2010**).

The notion of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) as proposed by Lave and Wenger's (1991) explains the newcomers growing involvement within a particular community. As they are learning to be part of the membership; changes, struggles and tensions may entail. Since they are new, they are unlikely to be skillful in the field. The notion of LPP turns spotlight on the power on the power relationships between the newcomers and more experienced members of the community. They experience hardship to control their learning resources and negotiations when there are conflicting viewpoints

It should be made aware that writing activities are always influenced by the surrounding or socially shared. Simultaneously, the social contexts that writing takes place in and the writing activities shape one (**Schneider, 2002**). The right amount and meaning of support a writer receive from the community will likely shape the activity and outcome. The right use of means allows writers to direct themselves well (**Yang, 2014**). In workplace contexts, the community in the workplace and surroundings communicates with the activities that writing endure and help guide the writers.

#### **4. Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative-phenomenological approach to exhibit descriptions of the selected millennial staff's experiences and the information about their workplace writing in ESL practices. A qualitative study seeks understand people's cultures or lifestyles, attitudes, behaviours, and motivation their natural settings and free from a researcher's manipulation of the environment (**Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Merriam, 2009**). A qualitative phenomenological design best fits the focus of this study; to provide an in-depth understanding of the event in question. Besides, a qualitative approach was employed since the study attempted to approach individuals within their life contexts and not as individual entities. Social scientists believe that understanding human experiences is as crucial as seeking to predict human behaviour or testing theories (**Holloway & Kathleen, 2017**). The main aim of the study is to make accessible an in-depth insight into the millennials' experience with workplace writing in English. This study employs qualitative methodology as the research design to acquire detailed descriptions of their experiences. The phenomenon under investigation is an event of their everyday world. This study is interested in the quality of the participants' experiences and how they make sense of their individual daily life.

This approach employs data collection method that puts forward the real encounters of the participants. In the effort to capture the lived experiences of the participants, questions asked to revolve around what the individuals have learned and not learned (**Yin, 2015**). People's accounts are the small-scale

version of their consciousness surrounding every word they utter downright (Seidman, 1991). Consciousness reveals the complicated issues in social and education from people's real experiences. Thus, phenomenological study which seeks to study structures of consciousness (Ashworth & Man, 2006) is deemed appropriate for the purpose of this study. A phenomenological method to get data on English as a second language staff about their experiences in learning to an effective workplace writing or acquiring the rhetorical awareness. The data collection was conducted in seven types of services organisations in Malaysia took about a year. The research respondents include five government servant, one engineer, one accountant, five executives from varied services sectors and one journalist.

### Data collection and analysis

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

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

Previous qualitative exploration, for example, Leung (2015) are mindful on the notion of triangulation in qualitative paradigm. They suggested the insistence to describe triangulation from a qualitative research's perspective. In the present study, the data triangulation (time and different sources) was employed to determine the congruence of the event under investigation across time and various data sources. Thus, to consider data source triangulation, interviews were conducted in two-phase that required a long engagement with the participants. This triangulation was carried out as suggested by Giorgi (1997), and two types of data elicitation were employed.

### 5. Findings and Discussion

Together the results suggest that the regular practices of workplace writing revolve across texts and across the composing processes. As depicted in Table 1, the participants were found to have experienced writing using a set of genres, a regular writing process that involved translation and transitions that involved learning to adapt to the complex nature of workplace.

**Table 1:** How have the selected millennials experienced workplace writing in ESL?

Objective	Themes/ emergent themes	Theses
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Identification and describe	Genres: textual regularities	Textual regularities are constituted by audience awareness that leads up to the selection of styles to serve the communicative functions
Genres: writing processes	Translating	Different work sites have different composing practices and emphasis in each stage, and the process is often recursive which happened at different stages
Transitions	adapting to the complexity of social motive	Adapting to the complexity of the workplace's social motives made the selected millennials strived in i) translation tasks, ii) meeting the datelines, iii) matching the workplace language aspects, and iv) working with colleagues of different divisions and disciplinary areas and generation.
Transitions	learning to write at the workplace	The selected millennials experienced both guided and incidental learning in which the latter is more prominent and meaningful.

The participants were found to have developed their own workplace writing practices. Understanding the process and its relation to genres provides ideas on the regularities across the composition process at different work sites. Knowledge of the readers (audience) serves the genre the writer chooses in their writing decisions. The concept of audience's background is not conflated in the other ideas of workplace writing in L2 due to its different components. This study addresses the audience's (reader) backgrounds in understanding the complex social motives of workplace writing. Based on the study, readers are either a native English speaker (NES) or ESL speakers, different disciplinary background co-workers and different generational co-workers. It was found that the audience's background influences workplace genres, including the composition process and transitions that L2 writers must encounter.

One of the processes that recurred in all participants' experiences is doing a revision which is basically a fine tuning and rearrangement of a draft or a fully developed text. At this stage, they concentrated on "review the information" (Participant 4, int\_2). Similarly, Participant 5 had to "reread what I (Participant 5)'ve written" and "check so (to ensure) more precise... shorter" (Participant 5, int\_4).

As for Participant 6, "it's very tedious to this kind of process" (Participant 6, int\_2) because it served particular purposes. Revision was to ensure that report corresponded with the contents of a preceded meeting. "Tally meeting with a report" (Participant 2, int\_2). As for Participant 1, the purpose of revising is "to ensure that whatever we reported is correct and accurate as what we are perceiving" (Participant 1, int\_2). Revision involved the "GM (general manager) vouch, get it presented he will

see is it information correct. He said he wants to see before presented to the team, the other top management, he will vouch that this is correct or not” (Participant 1, int\_2).

Another recurring theme is learning which constituted in a large part of their workplace activities. The participants have experienced transitions into their workplace writing practices through guided and incidental learning. The forms of guided learning that the selected millennials experienced include guided participation. For example, Participant 1 and Participant 2 attended training conducted by their corporate training division and human resource department.

Also, one of the selected participants experienced guided learning through scaffolding. For instance, Participant 3 who was guided by her senior. Precisely, the selected millennials have attended writing and English enhancements courses. Training that they attended served the continuing education requirements for the employees. The trainings were meant to enhance their skills on a set of written tasks. Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) suggested that learning through scaffolding transpired when a learning performs an action along with a skilful co-worker.

Primarily, the selected millennials experienced incidental learning through engagement in the tasks, executing the tasks, from mistakes, social interactions, voluntary reading, and even smart phone applications. The finding of the study is best explained from the perspectives of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) LPP that views learning as situated in experience. The present study shows that the participants 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). Interestingly, incidental learning was observed as more prominent and effective to the selected millennials. Participant 7 who has experienced both types of learning found that she has learned more from making mistakes as she engaged in the tasks. 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). The selected millennials deployed reading, social interactions and utilised mobile applications that incidentally turned out into learning. This also accords with our earlier observations, which showed that 21st century levels of productivity in the workplace are facilitated by information technology (Black et al., 2015). It was also found that habitual practice, as told by Ana, facilitates learning drastically though not automatically. A possible explanation for this might be that participation promotes individual learning and growth which results in efficient work while simultaneously becoming meaningful (Black et al., 2015). After all, language learning takes place when there is a meaningful use (Yunus & Yusuf, 2019). In sum, the selected millennials experienced both guided and incidental learning in which the latter is more prominent and meaningful.

## 6. Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that when trying to get an up-close understanding of workplace writing in ESL, the exploration should oversee language learning and writing skills through situated activities. These kinds of activities enhance learners' or the staff's willingness to participate and learn about tasks. They also get to realise that a good foundation in language is pertinent for that purpose. In further work, investigating these three dimensions of workplace writing experiences; writer's ESL proficiency, work values and learning on-the-job might prove necessary. This study believes that apart from exploring the dimensions, future research should look for their effectiveness and relationships in



establishing workplace literacy and enhancing its effectiveness. The research could also explore the transitional role in transforming novice workers into experienced workers.

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