

## **A survey of writing needs and expectations of Hotel Management and Tourism students.**

Siti Hamin Stapa

Ismie Roha Mohd Jais

sitihami@pkrisc.cc.ukm.my

## **Introduction**

Students today face a fast-changing job market and high competition with the advancement of e-commerce as well as e-knowledge. It is evident that English is the lingua-franca of almost all jobs available today, especially in science and technology, business management and hotel industry. This contemporary reality forced many students to open their eyes on what they want to achieve in a language classroom.

In view of university graduates' need of a good English Language command in the workplace, this research aims at investigating the current language needs of students in universities and colleges, especially in the area of writing skills. Education at the university is a crucial stage because at this level students are preparing themselves to enter into another phase of their life that is their career, and therefore, they have certain expectations of what they want to learn and achieve in their learning process.

Developing writing skills is among the most challenging situation at tertiary level. According to Raimes, “ ..research in the writing of college ESL students, however, is still at the beginning stage and researches in ESL writing has not provided us with universally accepted theoretical and practical answer” (1985: 16). Therefore, research in the area of writing especially at tertiary level should be encouraged. The need to develop the skill is crucial due to the rapid change and development of the job market that requires graduates to acquire certain level of writing skills.

Besides that, the widespread use of computers and the Internet have dramatically raises the profile of writing and the need for effective communication. In a case study conducted by

Warschauer (2001) that involved an ESL writing course in Hawaii, one of the students in the course (a graduate from China) had problems writing business letters and even short memos and notices. At the time of the enrolment, he listed the writing skills he crucially needed and they were all job related written communication. Keeping this in view, it is felt that writing courses offered at university level should target on skills related to job needs and job functions to ensure that the learners are well equipped with the required writing skills in order for them to perform at the workplaces.

## **Literature review – English for Occupational Purposes**

EOP can be defined as “the portion of the curriculum which prepares students for gainful employment in occupations ranging from low -skilled to sophisticated jobs in technical fields” (Anthony 1997: 56). EOP courses focus on meeting the demand for workers by providing specific job training and skills through content-based instruction (CBI) activities in order to enhance basic skills development. According to Anthony (1997), most EOP classes will consistently expose students to sufficient training in reading, writing, speaking and listening. From the trainings, then students explore to their specific job functions that are required and necessary in their field of work.

EOP is more general compared to ESP because it does not focus on the specific job disciplines but it is more on general basic skills required by students in order to prepare students for the workforce. Examples of basic skills in EOP are reading, writing, listening and speaking. In the context of this study, writing skills required to perform in job functions are for example report writing, letter writing and memo.

A study conducted by Martinez (2001), indicates that “most (EOP) programmes incorporate basic job readiness skills such as job search, interviewing, preparing resumes, letters and filling out work-related forms” (p. 5). In EOP, “instructors are more interested to expose learners to workplace skills which are needed to enter, maintain and advance in the world of work” (Bukhart 1996: 43). This is because the learners are more interested to prepare themselves for better and more opportunities for success in the workplace.

Another EOP study conducted by Murphy and Brown that involved three different group of adult learners who were doing English courses revealed that the fact that “it is important to provide tangible evidence to these learners that the courses would help them to obtain employment and would facilitate a variety of job readiness and employability skills” (1998: 76).

## **Writing and EOP**

Writing, from an EOP perspective is a social practice in that writing and the writer are implicated in discourse and institutional practices. In EAP (English as a Specific Purposes), from elementary school through university graduate courses, students write to succeed in mastering the subject matter. Academic writing ranges from sentences to short paragraphs to essays and even research papers. In brief, EOP writing is more concerned with the content and format while EAP focuses

more on writing techniques such as process and development of ideas and logic. In an EOP context, emphasizing the difference in writing purposes and the resultant text structure are crucial in order to match the needs of the workplace skills. Furthermore, according to Baynham (1995: 4), “ .to characterize the knowledge and skills of a fluent writer, the need to emphasize the dimension of the required metalinguistic must exist. For example, the awareness of the different types of texts as well as the pragmatics is an important dimension”. Thus, in ESP context, the pragmatics and types of texts have to be explicit and narrowed. The interests and needs of the learners are necessary for them to realize the significance in acquiring the skill. In many EOP studies and modules, the needs analysis leads to a well structured and organized programme.

Research was conducted by Sidy (1999) to examine the relevance of freshman composition to writing in the workplace. Four professionals who had graduated from college for several years were asked about their writing in the workplace, college, writing classes and the importance of skills employers expected. The results indicated that:

- All participants felt that effective workplace writing must be job-related, concise and clear,
- All participants have negative attitudes towards the writing classes they had because there is a vast mismatch with the job expectation.

In general, the findings from this research suggest that the participants could not relate what they did in the freshman writing classes to the types of writing they have to do in the workplace.

Philips and Powers (1999) surveyed 200 public relation practitioners in Canada to investigate the type of writing varieties involved in their profession. The result indicated that the practitioners spent a lot of time writing memos, reports and proposals. The survey was also used to find out whether writing efficiency comes with writing experience and among the findings are:

- a. writers improve their text from time to time,
- b. they write better for work-related writings, and
- c. they show evidence of becoming good and better writers through the end product quality.

## **From theory to practice: the need for long term goals**

L2 language learning and acquisition have long been debated in many aspects: reading, writing, listening and grammar. The reason behind this is to discover the successful learning in L2 classrooms. Are there similarities in L1 and L2 learning and acquisition? This is the question that has raised controversial arguments in many of the theories in language learning and teaching. Krashen’s beliefs about language learning and teaching will be put forward to support ESP modules at tertiary level.

Learners come into a class hoping to achieve something at the end of the day. In learning a language, the ultimate aim is to be able to utilize the language in day -to-day tasks and most

importantly career demand. The needs of the students are crucial to ensure that learning takes place and the learners achieve their long-term goals. In a long-term goal, learners will experience the need to communicate in the target language outside of classrooms. Besides that, they also realize that there are vast opportunities career wise. It is evident that there is a necessity to identify the goals of the learners in language classrooms particularly because it does in a way determine the success of a language programme. Krashen (1989) found that ESL students' vocabulary, writing and spelling improve through extensive reading and the indication here was that using language extensively and for real purposes helps one to learn more of the language. When learning is meaningful, learners are expected to have greater intake based on input. According to Krashen (1986: 279) “ .comprehensible input is the causative variable in second language acquisition”.

### **The concept of need – the target situation needs analysis approach**

According to Munby (1978), needs analysis was firmly established in mid the 1970s as course designers came to see the learners' purposes rather than specialist language as the driving force behind ESP programmes. According to Chambers (1980) early instruments for establishing needs is by investigating the target situation for which learners were being prepared:

By the language I mean the language of the target situation. Thus needs analysis should be concerned with the establishment of communicative needs and their realizations, resulting from an analysis of the communication in the target situation – what will refer to as target situation analysis.

(Chambers 1980: 25).

The central issue to ESP is the necessary starting point in materials and course design. This is important because practitioners have to be selective at specific content-based materials and topics to ensure relevance. In order to achieve a reliable needs analysis, various forms of pedagogic and needs have to be identified to provide information about learners and the educational environment. In doing so, researchers identify three specified areas of needs analysis:

- Deficiency analysis. This gives information about what the learners' learning needs are, what students think they need and lack,
- Strategy analysis. This seeks to establish how learners wish to learn rather than what they need to learn. By investigating the learners' preferred learning styles and strategies, we get a picture of the learners' conception of learning, and
- Means analysis. This is the point where investigations on precise issues and conditions related to the educational environment in which the ESP course is to take place and the considerations involved.

Hence, it is evident that the role of needs analysis in an ESP setting is crucial as the focus is very much on learners and also the language and linguistics skills and items. Furthermore, analyzing the language requirement in profession and analyzing students' needs are important as to match suitability and to verify the contents necessary for the ESP course. It is vital that a comprehensible

needs analysis be conducted to ensure that materials and course design later reflect ESP rather than general or EAP courses for higher learning students.

### **The objective of the study**

The objective of this study is to investigate the needs and expectations of the Tourism and Managements students with regards to the writing courses offered in three colleges in Malaysia. The study attempts to reveal whether the courses offered reflect the specific writing needs needed for the workplace in the hospitality industry.

## **Research Questions**

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the expectations and needs of the students with regards to their writing abilities to function efficiently in job markets in the future? This is where the students' points of view are taken into account on what are the writing skills that they want to learn at tertiary level in order for them to transit smoothly and confidently from learning to working. Students who have completed their practical training are the main focus because they should by then, be able to decide on what writing skills are used most frequently at the work setting.
2. Do current writing programmes for the Hotel Management and Tourism students in three higher learning institutions reflect the specific writing needs required at the workplace? Here, the significant is to analyse the current syllabus and how does the syllabus prepare the students for their career. Are the students exposed to the necessary writing skills required at the workplace in the syllabus?

## **Subjects**

Fifty students were selected from three different institutions, namely Universiti Teknologi Mara Malaysia (20), Taylor's College (15) and Institut Teknologi Tun Abdul Razak (15). Their age group ranges from 23 – 29 years old. Students from Universiti Teknologi Mara have completed 3 levels of general English courses and also a course in EOP (English for Occupational Purposes). In the EOP course, students were introduced to the writing skills needed for the workplace. The students from Taylor's College also completed three level of English courses, namely Communicative English, Hospitality English and Business Communication. The students from Institute Teknologi Tun Abdul Razak were required to do four English courses – English Proficiency, English for Communication, and English for Business and Hospitality English. The students involved in this study are those who have undergone their practical training at several hotels in Malaysia. The significance of having these students is that they come back to the institutions after completing the training and would be able to identify and compare the writing skills needed to function well at their workplaces.

## **Instruments**

The only instrument used for this study is a set of questionnaire designed to gather information about the needs and to find out the gap of the students' needs to match with the workplace. The questionnaire consists of three sections: personal details, English writing needs and the current writing programmes at the three selected higher learning institutions.

## **Research Design**

The research was conducted as follows:

- (i) Firstly, questionnaire was designed as the instrument for data collection.
- (ii) Secondly, the subjects for the research were identified. Letters were sent to several higher learning institutions to get their permission to conduct the research and after getting the replies, three institutions were identified.
- (iii) A pilot study was conducted among the students in UiTM.
- (iv) Based on the findings of the pilot study, a revised set of questionnaire was designed and used in the collection of data.

## **Discussion of the findings**

### 1. Current English Language Programme

The focus of this study is to identify the writing needs of students to prepare them to enter workforce. Before analyzing the writing needs from the students' perspective, it is relevant to analyse the English courses offered in the higher learning institutions involved. This section will identify the types of writing skills taught and their relevance to the workplace and also the importance of learning English as a preparation to enter workforce.

Table 1 Writing skills offered by present syllabus

<b>Writing Skills</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Report	78%
Memo	82%
Notice	90%
Essay	98%
Summary	70%
Sentence	76%
Paraphrasing	22%
Letters	64%

The distribution of the types of writing skills learned in the three colleges shows that 78% of the

skills is devoted to report writing, 82% writing memos, 90% writing notices, 70% writing summaries, 76% writing sentences, 22% paraphrasing and 64% writing letters.

Generally all students agree that English is important in their field of work. During their practical training they were required to use English most of the time. However, for the question as to how relevant is their English course in preparing them for workplace writing tasks, 76% (38 out of 50 students) said that the English programme is inadequate to prepare them for the workplace especially in writing. According to the students they were not exposed very much to the types of writing genres used in their job functions. In fact, the structure and format of written texts were very rigid. For example, when they were taught how to write memos, the lecturer focused too much on the format of the text rather than the messages that need to be written. As a result the students could not apply what was taught when they did their practical training because then only they found that the formats vary and the important criteria in writing memos is the message and information to be conveyed.

However, 12 respondents from Universiti Teknologi Mara claimed that the English course for the occupational purposes was very helpful and useful in their job functions. While doing this course they were required to write reports, memos, abstracts, letters and minutes of meetings.

## Needs analysis of the students

A needs analysis is regarded as a criterion in ESP and it is a matter of searching the needs for an established group of students in order to match between skills in learning and working. Therefore, a needs analysis is considered primary in this study. The following questions were posed in gathering the data:

- Which writing skills are required most in the workplace?
- What are the expectations of students from their writing class?

Table 2 Writing skills needed for hotel and tourism industry

<b>Writing skills</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Report writing	98%
Formal letters	98%
Memo	90%
Summary	84%
Notices	76%

Based on the findings from the questionnaire, the need to write formal letters (98%) as well as writing reports (98%) are the two highest skills required in performing the jobs in the hospitality area. 48 out of 50 students stated that these two writing skills are the most important. The next two important writing skills are writing memo and summary. Based on the findings 90% of the

respondents indicated that writing memos is another skill which is important, while 84% responded that writing summary is also an important skill in performing their job.

In answering the second question most respondents indicated that they are not satisfied with the present syllabus offered at the colleges. They felt that the syllabus did not equip them well in order to enter the workforce. 86% of the respondents felt that there is an urgent need to change/revise the syllabus, while 10% said they are happy with the present syllabus and 4% are not sure.

When asked about the reasons for the need to change/revise the syllabus the respondents gave the following reasons:

- Not related to workplace functions (80%)
- Repeated programmes from previous semesters (98%)
- Boring and not challenging (76%)
- Focus too much on grammar (90%)
- Difficult (30%)

The findings also reveal the mismatch of what writing courses offered at the institutions with the real needs of writing in the tourism and hotel industries. The mismatch is presented in the table below:

Table 3 Writing Skills offered at the colleges

<b>Job-related skills</b>	<b>ITTAR</b>	<b>Taylor's</b>	<b>UiTM</b>
Letter	Yes	Yes	Yes
Report	Yes	Yes	Yes
Memo	Yes	Yes	Yes
Notices	Yes	No	Yes
Itinerary	No	No	No
Announcement	Yes	No	No
Summary	Yes	Yes	Yes
Not required	Synthesizing	Synthesizing	Synthesizing
Not required	Essay	Essay	Essay
Not required	Abstract	-	-

## **Implications of the findings**

Based on the findings, though most general writing skills such as writing essays and paragraphs are covered in present writing courses, the responses reflect that they may not have enough exposure to learn more specific job writing tasks. The need for a review of the current writing syllabus reflects the idea that the language programme is insufficient in preparing the students to perform tasks at the workplace. However, with the proposed revision of the current syllabus which focus more on job-related writing tasks, then, the mismatch between the courses offered and the actual workplace needs will be minimized.

The purpose of EOP courses is to fulfill the needs of students in preparing themselves for the workplace. By attending such courses will aid them to become more competent as employees in the hotel and tourism industries. Results from a case study in Harvard Business School (for introducing English for Business) show tremendous increase in motivation to learn, interest and participation. The learners are more willing to learn and perform tasks as they can see the significance of learning the skills. In brief, EOP does create a different learning environment for learners and this is important in order to produce capable students.

## Conclusion

The findings from this study clearly states that the subjects involved from three colleges share specific needs and objectives or rather goals in learning writing in English. The needs to perform job-related tasks such as reports, memos, letters and several others are among some of the common writing skills. Here, it is clear that students need to master certain types of writing skills in order to perform duties at the workplace. Therefore, many areas need to be looked into to balance EOP and general English language proficiency for students in order to ensure maximum effectiveness of the transition from learning to working. Apart from equipping the learners with the right skills the findings also support the need for EOP courses as the learners will get motivated when they do tasks related to their needs.

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**Biodata:** Siti Hamin Stapa, Ph.D is a lecturer at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. She has started teaching since 1986 and her main research interest includes teaching/learning ESL writing and written discourse.

Ismie Roha Mohd Jais, MA is a lecturer at the Centre of Languages, Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia.

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