IDENTIFYING THE NEEDS FOR BUSINESS AND MEDIA WRITING SKILLS AT THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract
Language becomes main tools to deliver information, one of which is through writing. As communication becomes more digitalized, written communication in English is more often used at the workplace. This research attempts to identify the writing tasks carried out by workers at various working levels. The data of the research were gained through questionnaire distributed to staffs working in companies or organizations in Indonesia. The data shows that writing skills are highly demanded for staffs from various areas of expertise and professions. The written tasks that are frequently conducted in English include internal and external communication, business and negotiation, and public relations. Since, the business English becomes a requirement to maintain communication in professional areas, the workers should develop their English proficiency, especially in writing skills. These skills will help them to carry out their written tasks at the workplace.

Keywords: writing skills, writing tasks, business English, business communication skills, media writing skills

Introduction
Global employment creates more opportunities for mobility of goods and human resources among countries and helps to develop countries’ economy through export, business, and trade activities. To support the process of business and trade, industries hire more graduates who are competent to communicate in international language. Mapped in ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint, all countries in ASEAN community have agreed to support the citizens of Member States to become proficient in the English language, so they are able to communicate directly with one another and participate in the broader international community (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009). Not only among the ASEAN communities, English is also used for larger and more global contexts to serve more specific function for the countries and one of which is trade. Export and import activities in global business open broader gates for international mobility of goods and human resources in global which influence the language used at work.

People involved in international business are required to communicate in English as international language. This also affects one’s career opportunities and employability. Employability is defined as a combination of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes to make a graduate more likely to gain and
remain in employment (Blackmore, Bulaitis, Jackman, & Tan, 2016). Nowadays, practical skills at work can vary and master only one skill is not sufficient to carry out tasks at work. In global employment, industries require their employees to have combination of various skills that include numeracy, literacy, and other skills related to the performance of business tasks at work (OECD, 2017).

Even before obtaining employment, English proficiency becomes a key factor for candidates to succeed. Based on a research conducted for non-native speakers, applied communication skills worth 79 to 84% of employment success (Ortiz, Region-Sebest, & MacDermott, 2016). Employment candidates with lack of fluency to communicate in international language will be considered less competent and have fewer career opportunities (Kim, Roberson, Russo, & Briganti, 2019). As they will work in international business, more specifically, employers will prioritize candidates who have communication skills, business etiquette, and interpersonal skills (Ortiz et al., 2016; Tran, 2015). They must communicate in English while applying business etiquette when performing workplace tasks. Referring to workplace tasks, writing skills are considered more crucial and demanded. According to Kiddie (2014), ability to communicate in written forms using various channels is highly required as business and professional communication becomes digitalized. Some common examples of written communication in business are text-messages, emails, letters, memos, reports, articles, press releases, brochures, and posters. Considering the significance of written communication skills in the workplace, this study will discuss the needs of business and media writing skills in the industries.

The Needs of English in the Workplace

The development of global industries also makes English business lingua franca that dominates communication for business activities. This term can be defined as language shared by members of the international business community in order to conduct business and work in multinational companies (Kankaanranta & Lu, 2013; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). To conduct business, written documents prior to trade, import, and export activities are written in English. In Hong Kong, communicative needs in the workplace will be specified for business purposes, like writing proposals, contracts, and business publicity (Chan, 2014). Not only becoming the main language for international business or trade, English is also used to ‘get things done’ at the workplace (Evans, 2013; Takino, 2017; Xu, 2018). As a conclusion to these, written tasks for workplace communication can be divided into business and media writing. These include writing e-mails, reports, websites, letters, promotional materials, notices, minutes, memos, newspapers, legal documents, and faxes.

According to Hellekjaer and Fairway (2015), in business communication contexts, English serves two major functions namely simple and demanding communication. Simple communication refers to daily interaction like telephoning, conversations, emails, letters, and memos while demanding communication requires the use of language for more important purposes like presentations, negotiation, press conferences, reports, white papers, and articles. Those activities belong to business communication and publications activities for the companies
that connect them with the stakeholders and customers. Not only in written business documents, English is also commonly used as lingua franca in global advertising. Employees should be able to communicate visual elements like display boards, photos, or graphics (Coffelt, Baker, & Corey, 2016). This technical skill will really help when creating business publicity or promotional media. Organizations in United Arab Emirates have been using English to communicate with external stakeholders, such as consumers (Nickerson & Camiciottoli, 2013). It aims to distribute information about the company to the public. The media can take many forms such as brochures, articles, news features, and press releases.

Business and Employment in Indonesia

If Indonesia can invest on labor supply, saving, and human capital, the country will be listed as one of the five countries with biggest economy in 2045 (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, 2017). Based on the prediction from the current statistics, the source of the country’s largest income will be from export and trade activities (Aswicahyono, Brooks, & Manning, 2011). Indonesia will improve their economy by increasing the trade activities. However, this condition can only be achieved if Indonesia provide their country with skilled and productive workers to carry out tasks in global trade (Nomaan & Nayantara, 2018). Higher education should provide learning activities that provide technical and professional communication students with valuable workplace experience (Kramer-Simpson, 2018).

Method

The data of the research were gained through questionnaire distributed to 171 staffs working in local, multinational, and international companies. The staffs work in various positions ranging from junior-level employees to managers. They also have various educational background or university majors such as English, communication, engineering, and economics. The questionnaire items were designed as open-ended questions that asked about the respondents’ education backgrounds, working positions, and their regular tasks at the workplace that require writing skills.

Findings and Discussion

Respondents’ Education Backgrounds

Jobs or tasks in global industries may vary and require combination of practical skills to carry out those jobs. Sometimes the employees should work on tasks that are actually not their main expertise. Therefore, it is considered necessary to equip the students with strong skill mixes, even those who are specialized in one area like science, technology, engineering, or medical still need to have complementary skills (OECD, 2017). One skill that should be added is business communication skills in English as the employees will communicate with internal and external parties.
Table 1. Respondents’ university major

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University Majors</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Based on the questionnaire results, the employees come from various areas of expertise, not only limited to English. Most of the respondents learned English, economics, and engineering at their undergraduate programs. This means that employees majoring in various disciplines needed to use English to communicate at the workplace. Those who are specialized in an area, such as economics, engineering, communication science, or tourism must also develop their communication skills to support their tasks at work. However, we can still find that most of the tasks requiring English communication skills were still handled by graduates from English majors because they were considered to have the ability in using the language to serve various business purposes, such as writing business letters, business documents, and promotional media.

Respondents’ Occupations

As English becomes business lingua franca, it is more often used in professional communication at work in non-native speaking countries for written communication, business documents, and publicity (Draper, 2012; Ehrenreich, 2010; Roshid, Webb, & Chowdhury, 2018; Takino, 2017). Most of the communication is conducted between the companies and the public, such as consumers, stakeholders, or clients. Therefore, employees who are in charge of distributing all forms of written communication addressed to the external parties must write the documents in English.

Table 2. Respondent’s professions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professions</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public/customer relations officers</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back officers</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial level officers</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and HRD officers</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research and development officers</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results show that various professions in the industries require English communication skills. The professions include customer relations, back office (secretary and accountant), managerial work, training and human resources, and research and development. They need English to communicate for different purposes according to their jobs or responsibilities such as writing emails or messages to the clients, preparing business documents, writing manuals, and
preparing promotional media. Based on the questionnaire results, public or customer relations officers used English more frequently compared to the other employees. This is because they had to communicate directly with public like prospective customers, clients, and stakeholders in English. They also designed and distributed promotional media through various channels like articles, newsletters, white papers, press releases, news features, posters, brochures, and posters via online and offline media. Other employees used English for business and negotiation, such as preparing business letters and documents, writing reports, and writing manuals.

The Use of English at the Workplace

Communication skills in English have become a major requirement that candidates need to fulfill in order to gain employment. Most industries or companies operating in local, multinational, and international levels set their standards for English proficiency using standardized test scores like IELTS, TOEFL, or TOEIC. The main reason is that they need their employees to work on various workplace tasks that require English communication skills. As more businesses utilize digital media for communication, writing skills in English have become mandatory skills that the employees should have. Failure to use appropriate language in workplace texts can lead to difficulties in gaining employment and career advancement (Hunter & Cooke, 2014; Takino, 2017). Therefore, other than to satisfy the company’s requirements and standards for employment, respond to oral stimuli at work, and utilize communication tools at work, employment candidates must be able to communicate in English to produce practical technical written outputs as well as read and analyze copious amount of information effectively (Tenedero & Vizconde, 2015).

From the questionnaire results, it can be concluded that employees with different areas of expertise and occupations still need to develop writing skills in English. Although graduates of English majors were the majority of the language users at work, but employees from non-English areas such as engineering, economics, communication science, and tourism also communicate in English through written media. All employees also have written communication in English as one of their job responsibilities. It became compulsory language for use not only by public and customer relations officers, but also others. Here are several written tasks that were mostly conducted.

a. Internal and external communication

The first written task is related to internal and external communication. In order to exchange information within and outside the organization, the employees use written channels like text-messaging system, email, and memo. All employees always wrote text message to communicate with their colleagues or supervisors and also communicated in office group chats to send and receive information. The use of text-messaging in the workplace made communication easier and allowed more immediate responses. Therefore, the employees sent text messages more often to interact with colleagues or supervisors.

To distribute tasks or give information, supervisors or managers sometimes wrote memos. But more of them prefer using text-messages or emails because the
employees bring their smartphones to work, so communication becomes more convenient and immediate. Emails are more often used to exchange information with external parties or branch offices. It is considered more formal to use email for communication with prospective customers, clients, stakeholders, and branch offices. Emails also allow document attachment, so they could attach invoices, proposals, drafts, or reports to external parties.
b. Business and negotiation

The second task is specifically done to conduct business and negotiation. In the back office, staffs who were in charge of administration or secretarial works had to prepare proposal, business documents, and business letters that would be directed to external parties. Therefore, employees in the back office should master more specific language for business. Some employees learned it at the university while other learned it at work.
c. Public relations

The third task that should be handled by the employees is managing interaction with public. In business, communication with public has vital role in keeping the business alive. Such tasks are usually handled by public and customer relations officers who interact with external parties using various channels. In terms of writing, public relations officers mentioned that they had to prepare company’s publication and promotional media to be distributed to parties outside the organizations. The examples of the media were articles, newsletters, white papers, press releases, news features, posters, brochures, and posters. Therefore, they also need to develop media writing skills in English to support their works. Not only mastering the language, they also need to practice the techniques and strategies to write effective media for the companies or organizations.

Several employees also mention other writing skills that they did at work like writing manuals and coding. However, these tasks are not related to business and media writing.

From the results above, it can be interpreted that business communication and media are things that cannot be separated because the core of business communication activities is to exchange information, both internally and externally. Internal communication includes sharing ideas and messages with supervisors, co-workers, and subordinates, while external communication includes communication with customers, suppliers, government, and the public (Guffey, Rhodes, & Rogen, 2005). This answers why employers require the employees to use English at the workplace, especially to communicate with public and external stakeholders using various written media.

For business purposes, the employees made use of their English writing skills to serve three purposes including internal and external communication, business and negotiation, and public relations. The results show similar finding with a study by Tomaselli and Caldwell (2019) that industries, corporates, or organizations utilize such business communication for adversarial, transmission, and dialogical purposes. In the context of Indonesia, English is specifically used in business and media writing for promoting products or services, delivering information about corporations to the public, and communicating or negotiating with the stakeholders.
Conclusion

Written skills can be considered as mandatory skills for business activities. Therefore, employers will prioritize employment candidates who also have good written commands in English. Employees from different areas of expertise and professions should be able to write business and promotional media for external parties such as prospective customers, clients, and stakeholders in addition to communicate via written texts with their colleagues and supervisors. Based on the data, the writing tasks can be classified into three; internal and external communication, business and negotiation, and public relations. Therefore, employment candidates should develop their writing skills, especially to support any works that relate to business activities before seeking for employment.

References


