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Employer Perspectives on EAL Employee Writing Problems

Perspectives des employeurs sur les problèmes de rédaction des employés ALA

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Abstract

In academic disciplines, content rather than writing accuracy is usually emphasized (Hyland, 2013), leaving many English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) students unmotivated to improve writing accuracy. However, the workplace may demand accurate and clear writing. Thus, Ferris (2002, 2011) called for research into employers' perspectives on inaccurate and unclear writing of EAL employees to help raise academic faculty and EAL student consciousness. To respond to Ferris' call, this study investigated: (1) employers' expectations regarding writing accuracy of EAL employees, (2) EAL employees' language problems in work-related writing, and (3) the impact of writing problems on EAL employees' employment and career opportunities. The study employed qualitative interviews with 10 Canadian employers for data collection and a grounded theory approach for data analysis. Results indicated that the participants generally maintained the same writing standards for EAL and native-English-speaking (NES) employees. The study showed a disconnect between the academic and professional worlds regarding EAL writing standards.

Résumé

Dans les disciplines académiques, le contenu est généralement mis en emphase plutôt que l'exactitude de la rédaction (Hyland, 2013), ce qui laisse beaucoup d'étudiants d'anglais en tant que langue additionnelle (ALA) non motivés pour améliorer la précision de leur écrit. Cependant, le milieu de travail peut exiger une rédaction précise et claire. Par conséquent, Ferris (2002, 2011) lance un appel à la recherche sur les perspectives des employeurs quant à l'inexactitude et au manque de clarté dans la rédaction des employés ALA, afin d'aider à conscientiser les professeurs universitaires et les étudiants ALA. Pour répondre à l'appel de Ferris, cette étude a enquêté sur : 1) les attentes des employeurs par rapport à la précision dans les écrits des employés ALA, 2) les problèmes langagiers des employés ALA concernant la rédaction dans le cadre du travail, et 3) l'impact des problèmes d'écriture sur l'emploi et les opportunités de carrière des employés ALA. Cette étude a utilisé des entretiens qualitatifs avec dix employeurs canadiens pour la collecte de données et une approche fondée sur la théorie pour l'analyse de données. Les résultats ont indiqué que les participants maintenaient généralement les mêmes standards de rédaction pour leurs employés ALA et anglophones de naissance (AN). Cette étude a révélé un écart entre le monde académique et celui professionnel en ce qui concerne les standards de rédaction des ALA.

Keywords: EAL writing; writing for the workplace; employer perspectives on writing

Mots-clés : rédaction des ALA ; rédaction en milieu de travail ; perspectives des employeurs sur la rédaction

Introduction

As reported in an earlier article (Hu, 2010), Chinese graduate students have considerable oral and written communication challenges in science and engineering disciplines. However, insufficient attention has been paid to this issue by academic faculty and English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) students themselves. One of the reasons is that in academic disciplines, content rather than writing accuracy is usually emphasized (Hoare & Hu, 2015; Hu, 2000, 2010; Gimenez, 2009; Hirvela, 2011; Hyland, 2013; Ortega, 2011), leaving many EAL students unmotivated to improve writing accuracy. However, the workplace may demand accurate and clear writing. Research on

nonacademic readers' perceptions of workplace writing by native-English-speaking (NES) employees (e.g., Beason, 2001; the National Commission on Writing, 2004; Hairston, 1981; Halstead, 1975; Leonard & Gilsdorf, 1990) indicates that writing errors not only impede meaning or distract readers' attention but can also create a negative image of the writer and the firm he/she represents (Beason, 2001). Such an image in turn may beg questions about the trustworthiness of the communication skills and professional competence of the writer and his/her firm. These studies just cited were mostly conducted in the United States. Little research to our knowledge has examined the perspectives of English-speaking employers on workplace writing problems of EAL employees in Canada.

To better prepare EAL students for the English-speaking workplace and to raise university faculty and EAL student consciousness of the importance of written communication, Ferris (2002, 2011) called for research into employers' perspectives on inaccurate and unclear writing of EAL employees. To respond to Ferris' call, we investigated the perspectives of English-speaking Canadian employers on the importance of accurate and clear writing of EAL employees. Specifically, this study investigated: (1) employers' expectations regarding writing accuracy of EAL employees, (2) EAL employees' language problems in work-related writing, and (3) the impact of writing problems on EAL employees' employment and career advancement. The study employed qualitative interviews with 10 Canadian English-speaking employers in Western Canada and used a grounded theory approach (Crocker, Besterman-Dahan, Himmelgreen, Castañeda, Gwede, & Kumar, 2014; Hu, 2009; Strass & Corbin, 1990, 1998) to analyze the data.

Literature Review

Language Accuracy in Academic Disciplines

In academic programs at post-secondary English-medium institutions, content rather than language accuracy is usually emphasized (Hoare & Hu, 2015; Hu, 2010; Gimenez, 2009; Hirvela, 2011; Hyland, 2013; Ortega, 2011), leaving many EAL students unmotivated to improve writing accuracy (e.g., Hu, 2000). For instance, in his doctoral dissertation study of 15 Chinese graduate students in various science and engineering programs at a major Canadian university and six professors of these students, Hu (2000, 2010) found that the professors generally provided little feedback on students' writing and tolerated language problems as long as the writing was comprehensible. Consequently, the students did not consider writing important; nor did they pay close attention to writing. One student argued, "If my professor does not care [about grammar], why should I care?" Even though the faculty generally offered little help with the students' language, they felt a need for the host university to offer English courses to help EAL students upgrade language skills (Hu, 2010). In another study, after interviewing 20 faculty members across four faculties at an English-medium university in Hong Kong, Hyland (2013) found that while the faculty generally wanted to "see students write in disciplinary approved ways as a means of demonstrating their acculturation into the field" (p. 250), they showed a relative lack of attention to language accuracy of their students.

Second-language students also show a lack of attention to language accuracy. When they have difficulty producing comprehensible writing or have to write language-intensive assignments, EAL students often turn to external assistance from writing centres and private tutors. Despite these supports, many EAL students continue to have difficulty in writing accurately after studying in academic programs for several years; moreover, they lack interest in improving writing accuracy and clarity.

The workplace, however, may demand accurate and clear writing. One way to raise the consciousness of both disciplinary faculty and their EAL students of the importance of writing accuracy and clarity is to learn employer perspectives on writing accuracy and clarity (Ferris, 2002, 2011). After all, employers are the end users, so to speak, of university graduates.

Language Accuracy and Clarity in Native-English-Speaking Employee Writing

Since the 1970s, a number of studies have investigated writing “error gravity,” namely, reactions of readers to the seriousness of writing errors (Ferris, 2011). These include nonacademic readers’ reactions to writing errors of NES students (Beason, 2001; the National Commission on Writing, 2004; Hairston, 1981; Halstead, 1975; Leonard & Gilsdorf, 1990; Shaughnessy, 1977). Of special relevance to our current research is Beason (2001), whose work was based on questionnaires from interviews with 14 business people in the United States. Beason’s results not only yielded a list of error types from the most to least bothersome, but also provided explanations as to why errors, particularly those higher on his bothersome scale, were especially significant and should be avoided.

The most bothersome errors were sentence fragments, followed by misspellings, word-ending errors, and fused sentences; unnecessary quotation marks were the least bothersome. Beason agreed with other researchers (Hairston, 1981; Halstead, 1975; Shaughnessy, 1977) that errors which affect meaning should definitely be avoided, but he maintained that even errors that do not affect meaning (including careless errors as in “The book is 12 dollar”) still need to be avoided because those errors may create a negative image for the reader. He argued that “although errors can impede meaning, a more complex and equally important problem is how readers use errors to construct a negative image of a writer or organization” (p. 58). Leonard and Gilsdorf (1990), in their study of 133 business vice presidents in the United States and 200 members of the Association for Business Communication from around the world, found sentence structure errors to be of highest distraction, including run-on sentences, sentence fragments, dangling modifiers, and non-parallel structures. Hairston (1981) also found some sentence structure errors such as sentence fragments to be “very serious” to her 84 professional respondents, yet her respondents placed even more value on meaning clarity and word economy, since most of her respondents were from business and professional worlds. In another survey of 63 major American corporations, the National Commission on Writing (2004) reported that writing is “a ‘threshold skill’ for both employment and promotion, particularly for salaried employees” (p. 3), and that two-thirds of employees in large American companies have some writing responsibility. In sum, most NES American employees are not just expected to write at the workplace, but to write accurately and clearly.

Although these studies were largely based in the United States, similar observations can be applied to English-speaking Canada as the two countries share similar workplace cultures. To our knowledge, no study has investigated this issue in the Canadian context.

Research Questions

Despite the studies cited above, little research has explored how nonacademic readers such as business administrators and executives perceive language problems in work-related writing by their EAL employees. Thus, Ferris (2002, 2011) called for research to explore the views of prospective employers on inaccurate and unclear writing of EAL employees, in the hope that their views will help raise consciousness of the importance of language accuracy in the minds of both

university faculty and students. This study represents a first response to Ferris' call, and it attempts to fill the gap by asking the following questions:

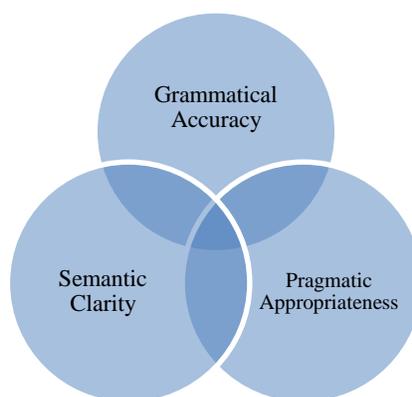
- (1) What are the expectations of employers regarding accuracy and clarity in the writing of EAL employees?
- (2) What language problems do EAL employees have in work-related writing?
- (3) How might writing problems affect career opportunities and successes of EAL employees?

Defining Terms

Work-related writing in this study refers to writing for work purposes and can consist of a phrase or sentence but is typically comprised of multiple sentences in one or more paragraphs. Examples are work-related reports, business correspondence, and work emails.

Language problems are those that affect one or more dimensions of language in communication. The major dimensions (see Figure 1), which are interrelated, are grammatical accuracy, semantic (i.e., meaning) clarity, and pragmatic (i.e., contextual) appropriateness of a language unit such as a phrase, sentence, paragraph, or article (see Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

Figure 1. Dimensions of language



The problems include, but are not limited to, those in the following categories: grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, upper/lower case, professional writing style (i.e., appropriate language) and clear expressions. Among these categories, grammar and grammatical errors have received the most attention in EAL writing pedagogy and research (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Ellis, 2009; Ferris, 2002, 2011; Lane & Lange, 2012; Shaughnessy, 1977). Likewise, in standardized English tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), language accuracy is regarded as a key criterion for high levels of writing proficiency. For example, the Independent Writing Rubrics for Internet-Based Test (iBT) Next Generation TOEFL states that the top level 5 “displays consistent facility in the use of language, demonstrating syntactic variety, appropriate word choice, and idiomaticity, though it may have minor lexical or grammatical errors” (ETS, 2015). Thus, in EAL instruction, research, and assessment, language problems have been typically associated with errors in grammar and, to a lesser extent, vocabulary. However, our study recognizes that language problems in work-related writing, as revealed in the

data collection later in the article, can relate to semantic clarity and pragmatic appropriateness as well as grammatical accuracy.

Research Methodology

Semi-Structured Qualitative Interviews

The objective of our study was to investigate employers' perspectives on writing problems of EAL employees, a highly complex and sensitive issue. It is complex because the problems include not only grammatical and mechanical errors but also problems related to semantic clarity and pragmatic appropriateness as described above, which may transcend language to involve divergent cognitive and cultural foundations. Such a complexity is not always easy for the average employer to understand accurately. The issue is sensitive because writing problems often have the potential to determine whether EAL speakers are employed, retained, or promoted. To accomplish our objective, we adopted open-ended semi-structured qualitative interviews as the most suitable research approach. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) stated that the "basic subject matter of the [qualitative] research interview is the meaningful perspectives conveyed by the participant" (pp. 357–358) and that "interviews are particularly appropriate when the information to be shared is sensitive or confidential" (p. 358). Furthermore, face-to-face interviews through questioning, conversation, and discussion can yield rich data (Hu, 2009) and in-depth insights into complex issues and situations (Newton, 2010), such as the workplace writing by EAL employees. In fact, Newton (2010) claimed that "it is the power of semi-structured interviews to provide rich, original voices which can be used to construct research narratives that gives the method its invaluable quality" (p.6). The "rich, original" voices of employers were exactly what we were seeking.

The interviews were semi-structured in that we used a guide. The guide, in the form of a list of questions, enabled us to make efficient use of the interview time and follow a certain order in asking questions so that the data could be comparable across participants. On the other hand, the semi-structured nature of the guide meant it was open-ended, as it allowed us to pursue other questions and topics that emerged during the interview and appeared relevant to the particular participant or situation as well as to our study. Using such a guide in an early study, Hu (2009) observed that "while the research questions [he] had asked guided [his] data collection and analysis, the former did not control the latter" (p. 632). Similarly, Creswell (1998) indicated that questions are often modified during research to reflect an increased understanding of the particular problem (see also Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thus, we were guided by but not restricted to a list of pre-designed questions. Finally, as Savin-Baden and Major (2013) suggested, semi-structured interviews are appropriate when researchers have only one interview opportunity, which was clearly our case (see below).

Participant Recruitment

Qualitative research requires theoretical sampling (Hu, 2009), or purposive sampling (Crocker et al., 2014), by selecting samples considered best qualified to offer information desired for the research questions, and in particular, for the explanation we seek to develop regarding the questions (Hu, 2009; Crocker et al., 2014). To locate desired participants for our study (see criteria below), we first contacted our institution's co-op program for recommendations as the program has a database of employers who have had EAL co-op students. The program places EAL students from academic disciplines into paid co-op positions in local companies in a small city in Western Canada. Based on the recommendations, we emailed an invitation letter to over 10 local employers (see Appendix A for a sample letter). The letter explained our research purpose and invited the

employers for an interview if they met our criteria; namely, they were supervising or had supervised EAL employees who were attending or had graduated from English-medium post-secondary institutions and who needed to perform work-related writing beyond the sentence level. Six local employers responded positively and all of them had or had had EAL co-op students as employees. Since the co-op students were paid employees, these employers generally treated them like regular employees. Participant A explained:

For paid people, i.e., co-op, there are higher expectations on performance. They are expected to write correctly and clearly (without errors). . . . Writing newsletters and articles for publicity and publication requires employees to perform at high levels with these skills in order to maintain a good image of the company.

As the local employers were from a small city where residents were primarily native English speakers, we were interested to learn what employers in metropolitan areas thought about language problems in EAL employees' writing. Thus, we emailed an invitation to over 30 potential candidates in a metropolitan area in Western Canada, chosen from a list of top 100 employers found on the Internet. Five responded positively, four of whom fit the interview criteria (see above). Their EAL employees were typically regular paid employees.

Table 1 summarizes some of the participants' demographics. Participants A–D and I–J were from the small city and E–H from the metropolitan area. Of the 10, three represented high-tech companies, with the rest falling into a variety of other industries. The participants represented both male and female genders with a ratio of 4:6 respectively. It is worth noting that the four participants from the metropolitan area were all female. The participants oversaw between two and 25 EAL employees, suggesting that generally they had had considerable experience working with EAL employees and that their views were well-informed.

Data Collection and Analysis

The principal investigator (PI) conducted face-to-face interviews with each of the 10 participants at a time convenient to both parties and generally in their offices or boardrooms. Each interview lasted 30–60 minutes. Since the administrators and executives were very busy, only one interview was requested of each. To facilitate the interview, the PI emailed each participant the interview guide (see Appendix B) so that the latter could be prepared prior to the interview. Instead of audio recording followed by laborious transcription (e.g., Hu, 2000), a research collaborator was present to take near-verbatim notes of the interviews with the help of the interview guide on laptop computers. The collaborator for the interviews in the small city was an NES master's student who had exceptional typing skills; the collaborator for the interviews in the metropolitan area was an NES doctoral student with remarkable research and English-teaching experience as well as exceptional typing skills. Meanwhile, the PI took notes on a hard copy of the interview guide during the interviews. Shortly after each interview, the collaborators sent the PI the interview notes by email so that the PI could compare the notes for accuracy and storage.

Data analysis proceeded using two approaches. One was to summarize answers to the interview questions in order to address the research questions. The findings through this approach are reported in the results section below. The other approach, a thematic approach employed in an earlier study by the lead author (Hu, 2000, 2009), utilized a constant comparison method (Crocker et al., 2014) to analyze the data across the answers to the interview questions in an effort to identify themes or recurrent patterns of response. This is also known as grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). The themes thus identified in this study include the

following: external communication for image, internal communication for content, and language-inaccuracy impacts on career success. These themes are presented in the discussion section below.

Table 1: Interview participants: Administrators and Executives

Participant	Type of Institution	Position	Gender	Number of EAL Employees (present & recent past)
A	Tourism	Manager	Female	5
B	Banking	Manager	Male	6
C	High-tech	President	Male	2
D	Medical service	Director	Female	4+
E	High-tech	HR Manager	Female	12
F	Law	HR Director	Female	20–25
G	Architecture	Managing Director	Female	8
H	Consulting services	HR Manager	Female	10
I	Education counselling	Associate Director	Male	8
J	High-tech	IT Manager	Male	15+

Results

This section reports on the findings from the interviews with the 10 participants regarding their perspectives on language problems of EAL employees with reference to each of the interview questions. The first interview question was: *What kinds of writing do EAL employees need to do?* The types of writing tasks provided by the participants fell into two categories: internal and external communications. Internal communication refers to written forms of communication shared within a company or institution amongst the staff. This may include emails, instant messaging, memos, design documents, brainstorming notes, and meeting minutes. All the participants referred to emails as a regular form of communication among colleagues within the workplace. External communication refers to written communication shared with the public,

including clients. External forms may include press releases, online and print descriptions of the company and its products and services, client business letters and emails, newsletters, technical reports, specification documents, conference or client PowerPoint presentations, and legal documents. Between the internal and external communications, the participants emphasized the importance of writing accuracy in the latter more than the former.

To get a better understanding of employer expectations, we asked the following: (a) *What are your expectations or standards for EAL employees' writing in terms of language quality?* and (b) *Are they the same for both EAL and native-English-speaking (NES) employees?* The participants' responses indicated that they mostly maintained the same writing standards for EAL employees as for NES ones. All the participants had high standards for EAL employees, expecting them to write perfect English in communication with the external world. For example, one participant stated, "We are fussy about our website. We have much higher standards than average for perfect English when communicating with the public" (Participant C). A participant from nursing explained, "Standards are high for patient safety, e.g., in documentation, email, and assessment tools" (Participant D). Perfect writing is not only necessary for patient safety but also important for the image of an institution. For instance, Participant B reflected on the harmful effects of inaccurate writing for the reputation of a company: "Errors can be interpreted as missing attention to details, which is frowned upon and can impact a company negatively."

To gain a better understanding of employers' perspectives on EAL employee workplace achievement, we asked this: *Do you think writing correctly and clearly is important for EAL employees' success?* The responses showed that eight out of the 10 participants believed that writing accurately and clearly is important for success in the workplace; however, all 10 agreed that if the employees want to seek advancement, then they would have to write clearly, accurately, and appropriately. For the companies and institutions where writing is the product, the expectations are high. For example, Participant H declared, "Writing is our deliverable. That's our end product." Furthermore, data analysis indicated that having an employee on staff with low English language proficiency can potentially add to the workload of colleagues. One participant indicated that "to constantly correct grammar adds more to the workload of the other staff" (Participant A). However, some participants were more accommodating. For instance, Participant G explained:

It's about who they are, what they can do, and if there are problems, I'll try and help them or we'll organize the work, so you take advantage of what they're good at. [Problem writing] may slow down or reduce the number of opportunities they have.

Furthermore, some companies and institutions have adopted a team-approach for work projects, which allows employees to work to their strengths and fulfill responsibilities they are capable of. Next, we asked the participants: *Do you think the EAL employees should write work-related English with accuracy?* The majority of the participants responded in the affirmative. Those who disagreed still maintained that it is necessary for employees to strive to improve over time regardless of their current English language proficiency. Vocabulary, grammar, and professional writing style were the participants' key areas of concern. These concerns were consistent with other studies (Beason, 2001; Hairston, 1981; Leonard and Gilsdorf, 1990) that found sentence structure errors to bother nonacademic readers. While Participant C claimed vocabulary to be the first priority for internal documentation and communication, he considered all the writing skills (see Appendix B) to be essential for external communication because "the face of the company needs to be perfect."

We then asked the participants if they had had first-hand experiences with EAL employees' writing skills. The question was: "*If you have (or had) EAL employees, is (or was) their ability to write English correctly and clearly ever a problem for them and/or you?*" Several participants commented on some EAL employees' poor writing skills. Participant A cited an example:

The final report was so bad; the English was probably Grade 4 or 5 level. We couldn't make sense of it. It seemed clear that the professor [of the co-op student] didn't proofread it. Because of this, the company was unable to publish the report, which, unfortunately, we had already informed the public about.

Another participant expressed concerns over a similar incident, "A co-op student built our pamphlet. He had great technical skills but poor English. This created problems down the road because it was more effort to fix [the pamphlet] than it was to just start from scratch."

To better understand the types of EAL writing errors most common in the workplace, we asked the participants "*If you have (or had) EAL employees with writing problems, what types of language problems do (or did) they have?*" The four most common problems described by the participants concerned grammar (especially, verb tenses), clarity, vocabulary (word choice), and professional writing style (including using jargon and text messaging language). This finding is consistent with other research (Beason, 2001; Hairston, 1981; Leonard & Gilsdorf, 1990). Participant J explained:

Most of the errors are verbal; however, I have asked some people to rewrite reports because of style issues; i.e., they didn't write [for] the correct audience, used too much jargon instead of simplifying. I have some employees that I wouldn't ask to send reports externally because they cannot communicate in a logical, professional manner.

Participant I also commented on inappropriate professional writing style (i.e., informal or texting, e.g., "c u tmrw"). He elaborated: "This is a sign that the employee is not recognizing who the audience is. Occasionally, I have to ask for clarification on some expressions." Not using the right style or register is a common problem for EAL writers (see Hu, 2011 for a detailed explanation of style). Some participants described their employees' inaccurate writing as being careless, not putting in appropriate effort, or lacking the strategies to improve such as seeking the help of a co-worker to proofread a document.

Generally, the study participants emphasized the importance of writing with accuracy in the workplace. To better understand how highly employers value this, we asked "*Would you consider NOT hiring EAL employees in the future who may make frequent or systematic errors in English writing?*" The participants' responses varied according to the skill set of the position they would be hiring for: technical versus English language skills. Poor English language proficiency would often be identified and resumés discarded during the screening process; hence, a poorly written resumé could potentially hinder a technically skilled person from being hired. Similarly, someone with obvious serious errors in the cover letter would not likely be short-listed for an interview. Participant E reflected on their hiring process: "In the first stage of the interview, understanding the concern in those areas—grammar, spelling, etc.—would make you potentially pause and ask 'How successful would this person be?'" Furthermore, one employer noted, "[Candidates with] obvious errors in the cover letter would not be short-listed. We get 50 plus resumé submissions [for one position], so we can be particular" (Participant I).

During the interview, we asked the participants "*If you would hire EAL employees who make writing errors, would it be important that they attempt to improve their language?*" All the participants felt it would be necessary for employees to strive to improve their writing skills.

Furthermore, we asked the participants, “*How might you help or motivate employees to improve?*” Several participants spoke of annual or semi-annual performance reviews while others referred to less formal one-on-one meetings to assess employees’ strengths and weaknesses and suggest strategies for improvement. Participant E described her corporation’s strategies this way:

We have one-on-one’s [supervisor-employee meetings] every two weeks to a month and a performance review twice a year. We have a number of in-house programs, i.e., putting together presentations, time management, etc. It’s our responsibility as an employer if someone needs to improve.

A few of the participants went as far as to offer to pay for programs and courses to improve the English language skills of an employee. To a lesser degree of support, many participants discussed the willingness of colleagues to help with proofreading or assigned tasks according to employees’ strengths in a team environment. Participant J responded,

A colleague would be asked to help them proofread and work with the employee to fix errors; however, the level required for English skills is low. So if the issue is a big one, then we would just ask someone else to do the task. This is a team environment, so the load is distributed via people’s strengths.

Discussion

This section presents themes identified through data analysis in a grounded theory approach. Topics or text segments pertaining to similar ideas are grouped together under a theme or subtheme; various subthemes relating to the same general topic are then grouped under one general topic or major theme (Hu, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Three major themes were identified as follows.

External Communication for Image

Communication is an essential part of most businesses. Two distinct categories of communication in the workplace that emerged out of the interviews were internal communications and external communications. The participants placed much more emphasis on writing accuracy in external communications such as press releases, product/service descriptions, newsletters, technical reports, and correspondence with clients. One reason is related to image theory; that is, errors in external communication may negatively affect the image of a company (Beason, 2001). Thus, as Participant C put it, “the face of the company needs to be perfect.” In this regard, Beason (2001) argued that “[e]rrors bother readers: errors create misunderstandings of the text’s meaning, and they harm the image of the writer” (p. 48). Therefore, readers will often draw negative conclusions about a writer’s ability if the writer makes consistent errors. Beason (2001) further explained: “A reader reacts to errors not merely by comparing the text to linguistic rules or conventions. . . a reader reacts as well by considering extra-textual issues” (pp. 57–58); thus, “defining error as simply a textual matter fails to forefront the ‘outside’ consequences of error, especially the ways in which readers use errors to make judgments about more than the text itself” (p. 35), such as the writer’s technical and professional skills. Understandably, such undesirable consequences are exactly what employers endeavor to avoid.

The image theory brings to light a disparity between employer expectations and research on faculty feedback and practices in L2 disciplinary writing (Carless, 2006; Ferris, 2011; Hu, 2000, 2010; Hyland, 2013; Price, Handley, Millar, & O’Donovan, 2010; Weaver, 2006). The academic world is generally concerned with disciplinary knowledge (Hoare & Hu, 2015; Hu, 2000, 2010) and “the rhetorical, genre level features of argument and disciplinary persuasive logic, rather than

grammatical accuracy” (Hyland, 2013, p. 244). Even though academic teachers want their students to write in disciplinary-approved ways, Hyland (2013) found that they “only infrequently [support] students toward this goal” (p. 240). Some even claim that helping students with writing is not their responsibility (Hu, 2000). Not surprisingly, academic faculty regularly give little attention to language accuracy, and students often find faculty feedback unsatisfactory (Hu, 2000; Hyland, 2013; Price et al., 2010). Yet, research has shown that textual conventions are especially bothersome to nonacademic readers (Beason, 2001) and language errors are “conducive to a business person’s making judgments about the writer’s credibility and capabilities” (Beason, 2001, p. 60). Therefore, as our study revealed, during the first application screening, resumés containing inaccurate, unclear, or inappropriate writing are often discarded to minimize the possibility of hiring personnel with unduly low writing proficiency. This is an example of image theory at work.

Internal Communication for Content

There are, however, instances where minor writing errors are tolerated in the workplace. This is typically exclusive to internal communication such as emails, memos, and technical reports. Especially in high-tech areas, writing accuracy expectations are lower as employees generally do not communicate with the public. As Participant J explained, “The most important thing is: Can you get your idea across? They don’t communicate with the public, so the standards are lower. Technical employees are given more slack because the concern is technical skills, not language proficiency.” These employees are only expected to deliver internal forms of written communication such as writing emails and submitting technical reports to superiors or within a team. In these cases, the focus of communication is on the content rather than language accuracy. Thus when image to the external world is not an issue, there is more tolerance for language inaccuracy as long as the language is comprehensible (see also Hu, 2000). However, it is conceivable that if language problems impede meaning or the communication of content (Majhanovich & Hu, 1995), or have an undesirable consequence such as jeopardizing a patient’s safety, then language problems may become intolerable.

Language Inaccuracy and Career Success

Despite differing expectations for writing accuracy in the workplace, employers affirmed that EAL employees who write inaccurate, unclear, or inappropriate English may have difficulty finding employment in certain fields. Even if they are employed, they are usually assigned roles where they work solely with internal colleagues or need only limited English skills. In addition, for most companies, there may be high costs to errors in document writing. For example, Participant E explained:

Yes. It’s reflective of our work product overall. The standard is pretty high across the board. The feeling is that if there are errors, then we’re not being careful. If a document is filed in court with one digit or letter off, then it doesn’t get accepted. The implications are great in our environment.

Sometimes if writing problems persist, the employee may be dismissed. Such consequences occurred in at least one company. Participant H explicated:

Yeah, we’ve had to let people go because we’ve tried and tried and tried [to make it work]. They had really good technical skills and we thought we could teach them writing. We had one let-go this year for very similar reasons. We worked with him for about a year and a half and it was just going nowhere.

Naturally, with higher risk of dismissal, more limited roles, and less demanding assignments, EAL employees' opportunities for advancement tend to be more limited, as mentioned earlier. On the other hand, for those participants who were more lenient with writing accuracy, the jobs typically required a narrower skill set such as fluency in a second language other than English or high-tech skills. As Participant E explained, "I'm less concerned about that [i.e., language accuracy]. If we hire someone who is French or Portuguese, because they support that market, then we accept that their English may have some errors." Therefore, some participants, especially in high-tech, education-counselling, and international business areas, place a higher emphasis on specific skills other than English language proficiency; however, having strong technical skills but weak writing skills may limit opportunities for some EAL employees.

The majority of the participants interviewed believed that writing well is important and consequently, if possible, they would not hire someone who has demonstrated poor language proficiency. Thus, a lack of English language proficiency may negatively affect a person's ability to find employment. Once an applicant is hired, however, minor or non-serious language errors in internal communication are sometimes tolerated. The general opinion of the participants was that employees should strive for continual improvement in their English skills. Participant D stated, "Significant concerns may lead to termination but most likely would start with a learning plan." While some employers do not use language accuracy as a measure in their hiring process because they are more concerned with technical skills, this does not mean that they are not concerned with language proficiency. Participant I explained, "For some positions I want an NES person for specific writing-based projects. For these jobs, it's a huge advantage to have someone who is language proficient." In other words, EAL employees with superior English writing proficiency will likely have more opportunities for employment, job success, and career advancement, thus highlighting the need for academia to provide feedback and treatment for writing problems.

Summary and Implications

University faculty and EAL students in academic programs usually place emphasis and priority on disciplinary knowledge rather than the accuracy of the linguistic form to convey the knowledge (Hoare & Hu, 2015; Hu, 2000, 2010; Gimenez, 2009; Hirvela, 2011; Hyland, 2013; Ortega, 2011). One way to raise the consciousness of academic faculty and students about the importance of writing accuracy is to seek the perceptions of employers, namely end-users of university graduates, regarding writing accuracy of their employees. Research with employers has found that employers generally value writing accuracy of their NES employees. What remained unknown and what our study attempted to accomplish was to discover the views of employers regarding writing accuracy, or conversely inaccuracy, of EAL employees. Based on the results and discussions earlier, the following summarizes our findings related to our research questions.

Our first research question sought to discover what employers expect from their EAL employees in terms of writing accuracy. The study results indicate that the participants mostly maintained the same writing standards for EAL employees as for native English speakers. Resumés containing inaccurate, unclear, or inappropriate writing often were discarded during the first screening. EAL employees were expected to write perfect English in communication with the external world, especially in correspondence with clients and online or print descriptions of company services and products, although minor errors were often tolerated in internal communication (e.g., emails and work notes). Paid EAL employees were expected to complete writing tasks independently or seek assistance from colleagues. Since co-op students were paid

employees, the university co-op programs must “articulate clear expectations, i.e., the job posting might say ‘fluent in English’ or ‘adequate English skills’” (Participant C) for positions that require strong written communication. At the minimum, the co-op programs should check the grades of EAL writing, English composition, and communication courses of EAL student applicants, and suggest alternative positions for applicants whose grades indicate writing incompetence. Furthermore, depending on their field, the study participants varied in leniency with language problems. This was also true for different departments within the same institution that had different writing demands, as revealed by Participant J. For instance, employees in communication departments are normally expected to have higher writing competence than those in IT.

Our second research question sought to find out what language problems EAL employees have in work-related writing. The participant responses were varied, reflecting different writing contexts. However, some problems noted were related to general language proficiency including grammar, vocabulary, word order, clarity, idiomatic expressions, and professional writing style (see also Beason, 2001; Hairston, 1981; Leonard & Gilsdorf, 1990).

Our third research question explored how writing inaccuracy might affect the career opportunities and success of EAL employees. All the participants interviewed agreed that EAL employees who often write inaccurate or unclear English might have difficulty finding employment. Even if the EAL employees are hired, they might be offered a learning plan for improvement, have limited opportunities for advancement, and are usually assigned roles dealing with internal colleagues only or requiring limited language skills. If the language problems are serious and persistent, dismissal may ensue.

Our research has implications for academia. The study shows a disconnect between the academic and professional worlds in most fields regarding EAL writing accuracy and clarity. It suggests that since most employers hold writing quality expectations for EAL employees on par with native English speakers, EAL students need to develop competent writing skills if they wish to be successful in careers involving significant amounts of writing. Research (Beason, 2001; Hairston, 1981) has shown that writing accuracy can affect the image of the writer and, consequently, the image of the company. Beason (2001) explains:

I do not believe students can understand error unless they and teachers alike better comprehend error in terms of its *impact*—not just textual conventions defining errors, not just categories or rankings of errors, but the ways in which errors manage to bother nonacademic readers. (p. 34)

Thus, Beason (2001) suggests that “error avoidance should have a presence in the composition curriculum” (p. 58). Both EAL and academic faculty should try to help EAL students improve writing accurately, clearly, and appropriately whenever possible (see Hu, 2010, 2011). Furthermore, universities should provide adequate resources for writing centres and student-support centres, as some academic faculty may not have the time or skill to help EAL students with writing (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010; Baik & Greig, 2009; Hoare & Hu, 2015; Zhai, 2004). Given that some faculty may have the will but not the skill to help EAL students with writing (Hu, 2010), the university teaching and learning centre or teaching excellence centre should provide professional development workshops and resources for faculty to learn about EAL students, their cultures, and how to help EAL students with writing problems. This way, we can hope that EAL students who wish to work in English-speaking environments are optimally prepared.

Limitations and Further Research

The study is limited in that only ten employers from two cities in Western Canada were interviewed regarding their perspectives on writing accuracy of EAL employees in the workplace.

Consequently, the findings may not apply to all companies or institutions to the same degree. Thus, further research will include more interviews, ideally representing more varied industries and geographical areas, especially those that employ large numbers of EAL speakers. Perspectives could also be obtained of EAL employees who were former EAL students regarding their writing preparedness for and writing challenges at the workplace. Finally, further research may seek the perceptions of academic faculty and students on the findings of the study based on employer interviews and invite academic faculty to consider the possibility of implementing programs to address concerns voiced by employers.

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Appendix A

Letter of Information about Employer Interviews

Re. Research project “Employer Perspectives on EAL Employee Writing Problems”

I have been asked by Dr. Jim Hu, the project principal investigator, to participate in a research project entitled “Employer Perspectives on EAL Employee Writing Problems,” which encompasses the following:

Purpose: This project is part of a larger project which explores (1) the perceptions of employers, English-as-an-additional-language (EAL) students, EAL faculty, and academic faculty, on language errors in EAL writing; (2) the differences in perceptions among these groups; (3) how EAL and academic faculty can better prepare EAL students for career success; and (4) how these perceptions might influence EAL students and employees in improving their English writing proficiency. This project is to focus on the perceptions of employers.

Research question: How do *employers* think of language errors in work-related English writing by EAL employees?

Study Procedures: I understand that Dr. Hu and his research team will invite me for an individual interview regarding my views on language errors in work-related writing by my EAL employees. The errors include those in grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, upper/lower cases, style, and idiomatic expressions. The interview will last about 30 minutes and take place at a time and place convenient for both me and Dr. Hu, the interviewer. Study findings will be presented at academic conferences and possibly included in publications. Upon request, I can obtain a summary of the study findings.

Confidentiality: Any information resulting from this research project will be kept strictly confidential. There will be no mention of my name or my company/institution’s name in any project report; only pseudonyms (fake names) will be used if necessary. All the research data will be stored in a locked file cabinet or on password-protected computers. Following the completion of the study, all the collected data will be destroyed by shredding and deleting.

My acceptance of the interview indicates that I understand the information regarding this research project including the procedures and the personal risks involved and that I voluntarily agree to participate in this project as a participant.

I understand that my identity and any identifying information obtained will be kept confidential and that I can withdraw my participation at any time without consequence by contacting Dr. Hu.

Appendix B

Interview Guide for Employers

Research Project - “Employer Perspectives on EAL Employee Writing Problems”

Background Information

Name:

Gender: [] male [] female

Company/Institution:

Position in company/institution (e.g., HR Manager):

Approximate current number of EAL employees in the company/institution:

Countries of origin of EAL employees if possible:

Home languages of EAL employees if possible:

Sample questions

Views on language errors in work-related writing by EAL employees¹

Explanation: Work-related writing in this study can consist of one sentence but normally multiple sentences in one or more paragraphs. Typical examples are work-related reports, business correspondence, and work emails.

Language errors can be in any of the following categories:

- A. grammar
- B. vocabulary
- C. spelling
- D. punctuation
- E. upper/lower cases (capital and small letters)
- F. professional writing style (clear, concise, and appropriate language)
- G. clear expressions

1. What kinds of writing do employees need to do for work at your company/institution?
2. What are your expectations or standards for their writing in terms of language quality? Are they the same for both EAL and native-English-speaking employees?
3. Do you think writing correctly and clearly is important for success in your company/institution? Please answer and explain.
4. Do you think the EAL employees in your company/institution should write work-related English with accuracy (i.e., without errors or problems) in:
 - A. grammar
 - B. vocabulary
 - C. spelling
 - D. punctuation

¹ Some of the questions are adapted from Dana Ferris (2002), *Treatment of error in second language writing*.

- E. upper/lower cases
- F. professional writing style
- G. clear expressions

Please briefly explain your choices.

5. If you have (or had) EAL employees in your company/institution, is (or was) their ability to write English correctly and clearly ever a problem for them and/or for you? Please explain.

6. If you have (or had) EAL employees with writing problems, what types of language problems do (or did) they have? Please choose and explain.

- A. Grammar
- B. Vocabulary
- C. Spelling
- D. Punctuation
- E. Upper/lower cases
- F. Professional writing style
- G. Clear expressions
- H. Other

7. Would you consider NOT hiring EAL employees in the future who make frequent or systematic errors in English writing in the following categories? Please select and explain.

- A. Grammar
- B. Vocabulary
- C. Spelling
- D. Punctuation
- E. Upper/lower cases
- F. Professional writing style
- G. Clear expressions
- H. Other

8. If you would hire EAL employees who make writing errors in the A–H categories in question #7, would it be important that they attempt to improve their language? How might you or your company/institution help or motivate them to improve?

9. Do you have any comments or suggestions for the study?