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BECOMING A BUSINESS WRITER: OMANI ESP STUDENTS' SELF-PERCEIVED WRITING CHALLENGES, NEEDS AND WANTS

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Abstract. *Today, effective English writing is one of the most valuable professional skills for growth and development in the world of entrepreneurship. In spite of the prominence of English as the leading language of business and business education, writing is still one of the biggest challenges that business students face. The purpose of this paper is to report on a study that explored Omani business student-perceived challenges, needs and wants in writing. The study used an online survey involving seventy students from Sultan Qaboos University who were asked to share their perceptions in regard to these three dimensions specifically related to the skill of business writing. Analysis of the data was conducted using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Findings reveal that business students place effective writing skills high in terms of their perceived necessity. They also indicate that in spite of interesting and engaging writing activities contextualized in Oman's world of business, students' overall enjoyment level of writing is moderate on average due to perceived challenges throughout learning, and lacks in perspectives pertaining to how the writing tasks and assignments could be developed and implemented, including providing more guiding writing practice, more feedback, more interesting topics and more real-world topics and tasks. These student challenges, needs and wants analysis' findings can direct further developments, leading to a successful English business writing syllabus and teaching practice.*

Key words: *ESP, writing skills, business English classroom, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the features of today's modern world is the prominence given to the English language. English has eclipsed most other languages in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and the humanities (Rao, 2019; Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019). English has been called "the fastest spreading language in human history" (Neeley, 2012, para. 7). Although English has not surpassed Mandarin Chinese and Spanish in their respective numbers of native speakers as specified by Ethnologue: Languages of the World website (www.ethnologue.com), it has more than two billion active users of the language, which combined with a global dominance over the fields of international trade, entertainment, and academic publications, means that it possesses a paramount role that remains almost

unassailable by other languages (Rao, 2019). Further, English has gained such preeminence that less than one-quarter of its users are native speakers (Rao, 2019). The geographical breadth of English, which is spoken in 146 countries, far surpasses Mandarin Chinese, which is spoken in 38 countries (www.ethnologue.com). This has an implication for the role of the English language student. Learning English is not primarily concerned with interacting with native speakers anymore; indeed, learners "are acquiring English because it will be required of them in a wide range of work related, educational and social activities, many of which will not include native speakers" (Mondiano, 2009, as cited in Grosu-Radulescu & David, 2015, p. 59).

English is now "the global language of business" (Neeley, 2012). Increasingly, multinational corporations have stipulated that English be the corporate language of their companies (Neeley, 2012) in order to standardize communication across diverse geographical boundaries. Neeley (2012) contends that there are three reasons driving this phenomenon: (1) competitive pressure – a diverse array of customers, suppliers, and business partners requires a common language of standardization. Ambitious companies that neglect this initiative may well be limiting their growth opportunities; (2) globalization of tasks and resources – common language inputs and outputs aids effective data-driven decision making, which is a hallmark of business success; (3) mergers and acquisitions integration across national boundaries – global negotiations are difficult enough even when conducted in the same language. When negotiations are conducted in several languages, "nuances are easily lost" (para. 13). Some level of English proficiency is required for anyone who endeavors to find success in a career in global business. The conclusion that can be drawn from this although it is not explicitly stated is that teaching of English, especially in the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), should extend its boundaries to focus on students' competencies and skills in English language use "in scholarly, professional, or working environments" (Basturkmen, 2006, p. 17). And written communication skill in business settings is no exception.

2. WRITTEN COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN BUSINESS SETTINGS

Written Communication as a Skill for Personal and Organizational Success

Writing is a versatile and fundamental skill (Graham, 2019). It allows individuals to successfully perform many tasks, including learning new ideas, persuading others, recording information, and chronicling experiences (Graham, 2019). Writing effectively is a skill that plays a prominent role in attaining successful outcomes both in school and in the workplace (Crossley, Roscoe, & McNamara, 2014; Hidayati, 2018). Conversely, Graham (2019) argues that the inability to produce effective writing will inevitably "exact a toll" on individuals' academic, occupational, and personal realms (p. 278).

In all levels of education, writing is the most used skill area to assess students' performance (Afrin, 2016, as cited in Hidayati, 2018). Competence in the ability to write clearly and effectively in English is a prevalent learning outcome in most tertiary educational institutions (Sparks, Song, Brantley, & Liu, 2014). Ninety-nine percent of professors polled at 433 colleges and universities in the United States rated writing as one of the critical intellectual skills that students must develop (Sparks, Song, Brantley, & Liu, 2014). The Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes, a project sponsored by

the OECD, stipulates that proficient written communication is to be expected of all students in tertiary educational institutions internationally (OECD, 2012).

Additionally, a successful career in today's workforce is dependent in part on an individual's proficiency of writing skills. Almost every profession requires some form of regular documentation (Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019), so it can be said that almost any modern workplace requires decent writing skills.

Effective business writing

Writing, in general, is a complex skill that requires a marshalling of competencies to be synthesized into a coherent whole. Elements of effective writing include (Why are students, n.d.): writing mechanics: grammar, sentence structure, and spelling; planning a writing strategy; communicating ideas clearly and concisely; constructing a reasoned, demonstrable argument; effectively marshaling evidence and using sources appropriately; and organizing ideas effectively. According to Sparks, Song, Brantley, and Liu, 2014, the complexity of writing as a skill includes all of the following dimensions: context and purpose; audience awareness; content development and organization; conventions of genre and discipline; use of sources; word choice and style; and mechanics. In essence, "writing is a learned skill that cannot be mastered in a short time and needs to be continuously trained" (Salimah & Kwary, 2015, p. 44).

The Plain Writing Act of the U.S. government (2010, as cited in White, 2015) stipulates that writing be "clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience" (p. 73). More than a purely intellectual act, writing proficiency may aid or hinder one's career success, as many jobs require writing tasks that require technical data to be presented in a clear and professional manner to an organization's key decision makers (White, 2015).

Many tertiary educational institutions offer courses in academic writing; however, increasingly scholars and practitioners have argued that "business writing" is qualitatively different from academic writing (White, 2015). Bovee and Thill (2014, as cited in White, 2015) define business communication as a tool that incorporates the four elements of professionalism, accuracy, clarity, and brevity. Professionalism in the business workplace refers to an understanding of an intended audience. For instance, managers vary in terms of their comfort level of more formal versus less formal writing styles, including salutations commonly used in the business world (White, 2015). The effective business writer is aware of such preferences, and tailors his or her writing to the specific manager involved. Next, accuracy relates to the reality that many decisions in the business world are data-driven (White, 2015). Language must be precise as key decisions often hinge upon the linguistic interpretation of data. Third, the concept of clarity in business writing refers to language being unambiguous in its intended or favoured outcome (White, 2015). For example, business managers report receiving emails in which good command of English grammar and sentence structure is evident, but the resulting action that is desired remains obscure. In others words, business writing often centres around "the asking" of the recipient, meaning that an action is required (White, 2015). Finally, White (2015) argues that, unlike academic writing, business writing prizes conciseness, without "long and wandering sentences", or "overly verbose paragraphs" (p. 77). Moreover, Zhang (2013) reports of a study in the banking sector in which business practitioners evaluated business students' writing capabilities. Unlike teachers of business English writing, who generally stressed grammatical accuracy and consistency of formatting of texts, banking executives were more concerned with "power relationships

between the writer and the reader, workplace culture, and time constraints. Their comments on language errors or visual appeal in student writing were also framed in terms of their impact on corporate image rather than linguistic proficiency" (p. 145).

Employer perspectives

In today's globalized workplace, the importance of generic soft skills has gained increasing attention in recent years. Unlike previous decades, graduates' subject knowledge and technical skills alone are insufficient for lasting career success (James & James, 2004; Nealy, 2005, as cited in Robles, 2012). In Robles (2012) survey of business executives, the top ten most prized soft skills were found to be: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic. It should be noted that communication, including written communication, was ranked as the second most important skill after integrity, with 91.2% of business executives ranking it as "extremely important" (Robles, 2012). Poor communication skills in the business world may lead to harmful and lasting effects, including "tarnished brand image, decreased employee productivity, ineffective or erroneous decision-making, misinterpretations, and mismanagement" (Kleckner & Marshall, 2014).

In the United States, survey results of the National Commission on Writing (2004, as cited by Conrad & Newberry, 2012) indicated that fewer than one-third of employees possessed competency in writing abilities most valued by organizations. Further, organizations found the majority of recent graduates' writing skills to be "unsatisfactory", leading to many firms hiring trainers to run remedial courses in writing for employees (Conrad & Newberry, 2012).

3. ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATION SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The design and revision of English for Specific Purposes courses is directly related to needs analysis (Chovancova, 2014). Basturkmen (2013, as cited in Chovancova, 2014) contends that needs analysis findings should direct the development of the syllabus. In the domain of ESP courses, learners' employment target situations and learners' course feedback opinions should be taken into account (Chovancova, 2014). Nation and Macalister (2010) and Long (2005) divide needs analysis into necessities (what students need to learn), lacks (what students' problems are throughout learning), and wants (what students wish to learn).

This study involves business students with the aim of evaluating their perceptions in regard to three dimensions, namely challenges, needs and wants related to the skill of business writing which is ascribed importance for higher education students (Didenko & Zhukova, 2021). The following research questions were explored:
1. What are the perceived necessities of Omani business students in writing?
2. What are the writing challenges as perceived by the students?
3. What do business students wish to learn and how do they wish to learn to acquire effective writing skills?

Study context

Sultan Qaboos University is a tertiary educational institution in the Sultanate of Oman. It is a national leader in higher education and community service in the country.

Providing 'specialists and experts of Oman in diverse fields, taking into account the changing needs of the marketplace and working within the framework of state policy on resource development' alongside with 'constant modernization of the educational process at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels' are among the university's objectives (Objectives, n.d., n.p.). One of the university's units, the Centre for Preparatory Studies, primarily focuses on the English language education and offers three business English courses for all students in the College of Economics and Political Science. Students take these three courses in their first and second year of their degree study plan. English for Business III course is the third and final course that students take to improve and develop their English language skills, including business writing skills.

Participants

A total of 70 students who were taking English for Business III course in Spring 2021 semester participated in the survey (N = 70). The proportion of female to male respondents was 65.7% (N = 46) to 34.3% (N = 24). Over half of the students (54.3%) were 20 years old, with most of the remaining participants being 19 years old (22.9%) and 21 years old (21%). Since most of the students take English for Business III in their second year of their degree plan before choosing their specialization, 87.1% of the respondents indicated that they had not yet chosen a business major. The specializations of the remaining participants were: information technology (4.3%), accounting (2.9%), economics (2.9%), finance (1.4%), and marketing (1.4%).

Research methodology

A survey instrument using Google Forms was administered to students. For quantitative analysis of results, average mean scores were calculated and ranked from highest to lowest. Standard deviations were also calculated to observe the dispersion of responses for each question. For qualitative analysis, participants' free responses were coded using observed themes that emerged. Two general types of coding were performed. Free responses were grouped into "positive", neutral", and "negative" categories pertaining to questions that dealt with enjoyment levels in the course. Additionally, free responses were grouped thematically, where possible. Similarly, for questions that dealt with suggestions for improving writing outcomes in the course, free responses were coded according to identified theme.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceived' necessities

The importance of fitting students' needs and requirements has been emphasized by many studies that examined teaching and learning in the ESP context. Marcu (2020), for example, contends that "every course, no matter what level, undergraduate, postgraduate, or as part of company development training, needs to be designed according to the results of a needs analysis that has to be applied to make sure that materials are properly selected for the purpose of meeting the learning objectives" (p. 311). First, participants were presented with several writing tasks that pertain to their future work in the business world and asked to rate each in terms of its perceived necessity. A Likert scale was used to collect responses, which were then ranked according to mean scores. For each business

writing task, students had to choose from: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. Results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Scale mean scores and standard deviations of perceived necessity
of writing tasks for future work

No	Writing Skill	Mean Score (future work)	Standard Deviation
1	Writing a CV to find a job	4.54	0.77
2	Writing clear and effective English	4.37	0.90
3	Writing business emails	4.27	0.88
4	Writing business memos	4.09	0.88
5	Writing business letters	4.07	0.91
6	Writing business research reports	3.93	1.17

As models of future professional and business practices and sources of language, tasks and assignments in English business writing seem to present real situations and practices. Here, we find that there is a lot of agreement among students on the necessity of being able to effectively write a CV (mean = 4.54, std. dev. = 0.77). The ability to write in "clear and effective English" also placed high in terms of its perceived necessity (mean = 4.37; std. dev. = 0.90). As can be seen in Table 1, business emails (mean = 4.27, std. dev. = 0.88), memos (mean = 4.09, std. dev, = 0.88), and business letters (mean = 4.07, std. dev. = 0.91) were generally also viewed as necessary writing tasks in their future work. Writing business research reports (mean = 3.93) were perceived to be the least necessary among the choices. However, there was more variance among answers here as research reports had the highest standard deviation (std. dev. = 1.17). Conversely, the least amount of spread of answers belonged to the task of "writing a CV to find a job" (std. dev. = 0.77), indicating that most students found this task to be indispensable.

Writing challenges

Next, students were asked about their competency regarding elements of proficient writing, such as skill related to grammar, spelling, punctuation, composition, paraphrasing, proofreading, and referencing. These are viewed as common writing challenges. Fourteen writing skills were presented and participants used a Likert scale to rate their competency in terms of the degree of challenge for each: 5 = strongly agree; 4 = agree; 3 = neutral; 2 = disagree; and 1 = strongly disagree. Results can be seen in Table 2.

As can be seen in Table 2, students expressed the most confidence with their abilities in capitalization (mean = 4.59), linking expressions (mean = 4.16), conclusion writing (mean = 4.16), punctuation (mean = 4.01), and formatting (mean = 3.99). Conversely, students expressed the least confidence with paraphrasing (mean = 3.69), proofreading (mean = 3.63), using correct grammar (mean = 3.60), using precise vocabulary (mean = 3.59), and in text citation and referencing (mean = 3.54), indicating that these last five skills were seen to be the most challenging. Further, it can be noted that the least amount of variance of responses related to capitalization (std. dev. = 0.77), organization of ideas into paragraphs (std. dev. = 0.76), and conclusion writing (std. dev. = 0.79). In text citation and referencing showed the highest amount of variance (std. dev. = 1.10) indicating that it is not the weakest area for all students, although it was generally weaker on average, and therefore more challenging.

Table 2. Scale mean scores and standard deviations of competency in English (challenges)

No	Skills	Mean Score (competency)	Standard Deviation
1	Using capital letters properly	4.59	0.77
2	Using effective linking expressions	4.16	0.88
3	Writing a conclusion	4.16	0.79
4	Using correct punctuation	4.01	0.88
5	Formatting documents professionally	3.99	0.84
6	Writing effective topic sentences	3.90	0.82
7	Organizing ideas into effective paragraphs	3.87	0.76
8	Spelling words correctly	3.86	0.87
9	Writing effective supporting sentences	3.69	0.83
10	Using paraphrasing skills	3.69	0.94
11	Proofreading documents	3.63	0.87
12	Using correct grammar	3.60	0.89
13	Using precise vocabulary to express ideas	3.59	0.89
14	Writing in text citations and references	3.54	1.10

What students wish to learn and how they wish to learn

The third element of needs analysis is "wants" (what students wish to learn). The main focus here is on business class activities and suggestions made by the participants. Students were presented with twelve suggestions in the form of various writing activities. A Likert scale was used for students to evaluate how "interesting, useful, and engaging" each of these activities were, choosing from: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. Writing activities were then ranked according to mean scores, and standard deviations were calculated to note the dispersion of the responses. Results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Scale mean scores and standard deviations of preferred topics
for business writing (wants)

No	Skills	Mean Score (preferred topics)	Standard Deviation
1	Companies in Oman	4.01	0.96
2	The world's most successful companies	4.01	0.97
3	Marketing and advertising strategies	3.77	1.21
4	Managing people in a company	3.73	1.14
5	New technologies in business	3.69	1.15
6	New entrepreneurs	3.59	1.00
7	Famous business people/CEOs	3.57	1.16
8	Current economic conditions	3.54	1.34
9	Business concepts	3.26	1.30
10	Daily business news stories	3.24	1.10
11	Current research in business journals	3.20	1.12
12	Reviewing a well-known business book	2.83	1.09

As can be seen in Table 3, the top five writing topics that students felt were "interesting, useful, and engaging" were: "companies in Oman" (mean = 4.01); "the world's most successful companies" (mean = 4.01); "marketing and advertising strategies" (mean = 3.77); "managing people in a company" (mean = 3.73); and "new technologies in business" (mean = 3.69). Conversely, the two writing topics that garnered the least amount of interest were: "current research in business journals" (mean = 3.20); and "reviewing a well-known business book" (mean = 2.83). As can be seen from the standard deviation scores in table 3, this third question that asked about preferred writing activities generated a lot more variance in scores as compared with questions regarding writing necessities and challenges. This is most likely due to the inherent subjectivity in the question as it relates to students' business interests. Nevertheless, students' responses showed the least amount of variance for the preferred writing topics of "companies in Oman" (std. dev. = 0.96), and "the world's most successful companies" (std. dev. = 0.97).

Enjoyment level

The next part of the survey involved questions related to students' enjoyment level of writing. Students were asked if they enjoyed writing, in an overall sense, in the English for Business class. They then chose a response along a continuum from "1 = I enjoy it very much", to "5 = I don't enjoy it at all". The following bar chart (Figure 1) displays their responses.
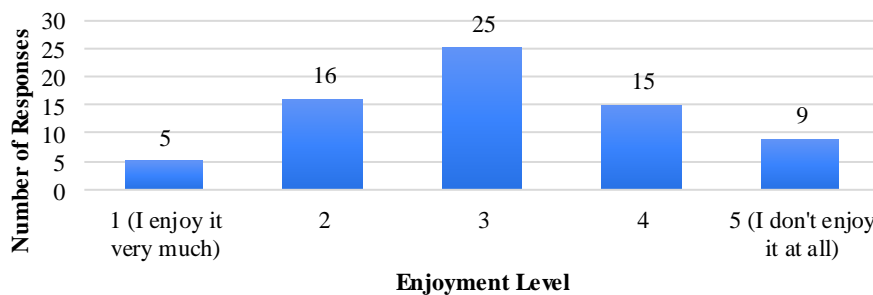

Fig. 1. Ejoymennt Level of Writing

As we can see from figure 1, students' overall enjoyment level of writing showed a range in which 25 out of 70 students (35.7%) neither enjoyed nor didn't enjoy writing. The number of students who really enjoyed or moderately enjoyed writing was 21 out of 70 (30%). Finally, the number of students who didn't enjoy writing, in a moderate or extreme sense, was 24 out of 70 (34.3%).

Students were then asked in an open-ended question to provide reasons why they enjoyed or didn't enjoy writing in the English for Business class. A total of 49 responses were received. An analysis of these qualitative responses was conducted to identify possible recurring themes.

Responses were coded along thematic lines and then tabulated to determine which themes occurred most often. Most of the responses either provided a reason for enjoying or not enjoying writing. Several respondents gave a response along the lines of "it depends", containing both a positive and negative theme, which were tabulated accordingly. Themes were then ranked according to frequency. Results can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Reasons for enjoying writing activities
in the English for Business class

No	Reason	Frequency (number of similar responses)
1	Desire to improve writing skills	5
2	Interesting topics	5
3	Opportunity to express own opinions	4
4	Enjoy business topics in general	2
5	Can learn about business through writing	2
6	Desire to improve business vocabulary	1
7	Opportunity to be creative	1

As seen in Table 4, the three most common reasons for enjoying writing were: "desire to improve writing skills" (n = 5); "interesting topics" (n = 5); and "opportunity to express own opinions" (n = 4). To illustrate, one student responded:' 'I enjoy writing in English for Business course because it moves my writing skills such as paraphrasing. I've also become really good at it which makes me feel fulfilled about myself.' According to another student, she enjoyed writing 'because it is always a pleasure to express opinion and reflect the writer personality with a strong business words.' However, a wider variety of themes were identified among the reasons for not enjoying writing in business English class, and they are presented in Table 5. They are listed in their decreasing order of frequency.

Table 5. Reasons for not enjoying writing activities
in the English for Business class

No	Reason	Frequency (number of similar responses)
1	Dislike paraphrasing	5
2	Uninteresting topics	5
3	Penalized with low marks	4
4	Dislike writing in general	3
5	Limited time to complete writing task	3
6	Dislike referencing	2
7	Insufficient in class practice	2
8	Lack of choice regarding writing tasks	2
9	Lack of business knowledge	1
10	Mentally exhausting	1
11	Struggle with punctuation	1
12	Struggle with vocabulary	1
13	Too many writing tasks	1
14	Topics are too challenging	1
15	Unclear instruction from teachers	1

As can be seen in Table 5, over 40% of the responses here (n = 14) pertained to three themes related to a dislike of paraphrasing (n = 5); a feeling that writing topics are not engaging (n = 5); and a perception that writing outcomes often result in low marks (n =

4). Many students in the course often indicate that they struggle with paraphrasing, which is a necessary research writer's skill in tertiary education. They also point out insufficient knowledge of business-related context and content. Here are some students' responses: 'Writing is interesting, but sometimes I feel distracted because of difficult topics and questions.'; 'It's not fun because I don't have enough background about the topics.'

Students' suggestions for improvement

Finally, students were asked to provide suggestions pertaining to how the writing tasks and assignments in the course could be improved. A total of 46 responses were received, and of these, 12 themes were identified and tabulated. Results can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6. Suggestions for improving writing activities
in the English for Business class

No	Reason	Frequency (number of similar responses)
1	Provide more interesting topics	11
2	Provide more guided writing practice	9
3	Change marking criteria	4
4	Provide more feedback	4
5	Provide more real-world topics and tasks	2
6	Provide more time to write in class	2
7	Provide clearer instruction	2
8	Make writing more personalized	1
9	Model good writing	1
10	Provide more choice in writing tasks	1
11	Reduce number of writing tasks	1
12	Use more business vocabulary	1

Here, approximately half of the total responses related to two themes: a desire for "more interesting topics" (n = 11); and a desire for "more guided writing practice" (n = 9). Here are some students' responses related to the type of writing topics in the course: 'writing topics should be related to how the business world works nowadays'; 'let students bring some information from daily life, which happened recently in Oman or in the world'; 'I feel like it could be more interesting in a way that relates to our daily life or the specific environment we are living in'. In terms of the theme for more guided writing practice, students made the following comments: 'we need to practice more during the class with the teachers, so we can discuss with him and know where our mistake is'; 'by giving the students more practice, directing them to what is right and what mistakes to avoid. Also, by illustrating to them some tips'; 'more practice in the class instead of assignments. Having conditions similar to the exam helps in improving my writing skills in the exam.'

5. CONCLUSION

This paper reported on a study that looked into Omani business student-perceived challenges, needs and wants in writing. The examination that involved business students at Sultan Qaboos University revealed that business students place effective writing skills high in terms of their perceived necessity. However, though writing activities and tasks currently offered are perceived as interesting and engaging, students' overall enjoyment level of writing is mostly low or moderate due to perceived challenges throughout learning and lacks in perspectives pertaining to how the writing tasks and assignments could be developed and implemented, including providing more guiding writing practice, more feedback, more interesting topics and more real-world topics and tasks. These student challenges, needs and wants analysis' findings can direct further developments, leading to a successful English business writing syllabus and teaching practice.

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