

Workplace-Oriented English Writing Challenges among Applied English Majors and Teaching Responses

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ABSTRACT

In vocational undergraduate education, applied English programs place strong emphasis on English writing abilities that can be directly transferred to workplace communication. However, classroom practice indicates that many applied English majors continue to experience difficulties when completing workplace-oriented English writing tasks. Drawing on authentic student writing collected from an English writing course and supplemented by classroom observation, this study examines common challenges in workplace-oriented English writing, with particular attention to task understanding, organizational coherence, and register control. Rather than adopting an experimental intervention, the analysis is grounded in naturally produced classroom texts. The findings suggest that these challenges are closely related to exam-oriented writing habits and limited familiarity with workplace genres. Based on the analysis, practical teaching responses are proposed to support more effective workplace-oriented English writing instruction in applied English programs.

KEYWORDS

Applied English; Workplace-Oriented English Writing; Writing Instruction; Vocational Undergraduate Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Applied English majors in vocational undergraduate institutions are expected to develop English writing skills that can be directly transferred to workplace communication. Unlike general academic writing, workplace-oriented English writing usually serves clear communicative purposes, such as requesting information, reporting progress, or coordinating tasks. Typical writing tasks include emails, notices, short reports, and task-based responses written in English, all of which require clarity, appropriateness, and efficiency [1-2]. In these contexts, effective English writing depends not only on grammatical accuracy but also on the writer's ability to understand task requirements, organize information coherently, and select language that matches professional expectations.

However, classroom practice suggests that many applied English majors experience difficulties when completing such workplace-oriented English writing tasks. Students who perform well in vocabulary or grammar exercises may still struggle to produce writing that fulfills communicative purposes in real-world contexts. This gap between linguistic knowledge and functional writing performance has become a persistent concern in applied English programs, particularly in vocational undergraduate education where employability-oriented outcomes are emphasized.

Research on second language writing has increasingly highlighted the importance of genre awareness, discourse organization, and register control in learners' writing development [3–5]. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature concentrates on academic writing or relies on controlled pedagogical interventions. Comparatively fewer studies focus on the recurring problems found in everyday classroom writing tasks that simulate workplace communication, especially within applied English programs [6]. From a teaching perspective, identifying these common difficulties is essential for aligning English writing instruction with vocational learning objectives. Therefore, this study aims to examine workplace-oriented English writing challenges among applied English majors and to discuss teaching responses grounded in routine classroom practice.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in an English writing elective course for third-year Applied English majors at a vocational undergraduate institution. Thirty-two students enrolled in the course. The writing tasks were designed to mirror workplace communication needs and were completed in English, including situational emails, short notices, and brief reports commonly used in professional settings.

Data were collected from students' routine English writing assignments over one academic semester. In addition, classroom observation notes recorded during writing instruction and feedback sessions were used to contextualize the analysis. This study adopts a classroom-based qualitative approach, aiming to identify recurring patterns in students' workplace-oriented English writing rather than to examine the effects of a specific instructional intervention [7].

3. WORKPLACE-ORIENTED ENGLISH WRITING CHALLENGES

Analysis of the collected texts reveals three major challenges that repeatedly appear in students' workplace-oriented English writing: misunderstanding of task requirements, weak organizational coherence, and inappropriate register use. These challenges are not isolated linguistic problems but reflect deeper issues related to students' prior learning experiences and their understanding of writing as social action.

3.1. Task Understanding in English Writing for the Workplace

A common challenge is incomplete understanding of workplace-oriented English writing tasks. Some students respond to the general topic but fail to address specific communicative goals, such as making a request, providing information, or proposing an action. As a result, their English writing may be linguistically accurate but functionally ineffective. From a discourse perspective, such writing fails to achieve its intended illocutionary force, even when surface-level language appears acceptable.

This problem suggests that many students approach writing as sentence production rather than as purposeful communication. In exam-oriented contexts, writing tasks are often reduced to predictable prompts with limited variation. When transferred to workplace-oriented English writing, this habit leads students to overlook contextual variables such as audience expectations and situational constraints. Research on task-based second language writing similarly indicates that insufficient task interpretation can significantly limit communicative success [8-9].

3.2. Organizational Coherence in Practical English Texts

Weak organization is another recurring issue. Many English texts lack a clear structure that guides the reader through the message. Information may be presented in a fragmented sequence, with insufficient use of logical connectors or paragraphing. In workplace communication, such organizational problems can reduce clarity, efficiency, and professional credibility.

From a functional viewpoint, coherence in workplace-oriented English writing is closely related to readers' processing needs. Unlike academic essays, workplace texts are often read quickly and selectively. When organizational signals are unclear, readers may struggle to identify key information or intended actions. Previous studies have identified coherence as a persistent challenge for second language writers, particularly when producing extended or purpose-driven texts that require discourse-level control [10–12].

3.3. Register Use and Contextual Appropriateness

Register-related problems are also evident in students' English writing. Informal expressions or spoken-style language sometimes appear in texts that require a professional tone. In other cases, students rely on literal translation from their first language, resulting in expressions that are pragmatically inappropriate in English. Such patterns indicate limited awareness of how linguistic choices index social relationships and professional norms.

Research on register awareness emphasizes that effective writing involves sensitivity to context-dependent variation rather than the mechanical application of grammatical rules [13–15]. In workplace-oriented English writing, register control is particularly important because inappropriate tone may affect not only clarity but also interpersonal relations and institutional image.

4. DISCUSSION

The workplace-oriented English writing challenges identified in this study are closely interconnected. Inadequate understanding of task requirements often leads students to produce texts that fail to achieve intended communicative purposes. When writers are unclear about what the task requires, problems in organization and register selection tend to follow. As a result, English writing that is grammatically acceptable may still appear ineffective or inappropriate in workplace contexts.

One important factor underlying these challenges is students' prior exam-oriented writing experience. Many applied English majors have been trained primarily to meet examination criteria that prioritize grammatical accuracy and fixed structural patterns. While such training may help students avoid surface-level errors, it does not necessarily prepare them to handle writing tasks that require flexible adaptation to audience, purpose, and context [16]. Consequently, students may rely on familiar patterns even when these patterns do not suit workplace communication.

Another contributing factor relates to instructional focus and feedback practices. In some classroom settings, feedback on English writing tends to concentrate on sentence-level errors, such as grammar or word choice. Although such feedback is necessary, it may unintentionally lead students to overlook higher-level concerns, including coherence, task fulfillment, and register appropriateness. Recent research suggests that feedback addressing both linguistic form and discourse-level features is more likely to support meaningful writing development in authentic classroom contexts [17].

5. TEACHING RESPONSES

The findings of this study suggest that improving workplace-oriented English writing requires instructional adjustments that go beyond error correction. Teaching responses should aim to reshape students' understanding of writing as purposeful, context-sensitive communication.

First, workplace-oriented English writing tasks should be preceded by explicit task analysis. Teachers can guide students to identify communicative goals, target readers, and expected outcomes before drafting in English. This practice helps students shift their attention from sentence-level accuracy to functional adequacy, which is central to workplace communication.

Second, organizational patterns commonly used in workplace English genres should be taught explicitly and repeatedly. Rather than presenting organization as an abstract principle, teachers can introduce genre-specific templates, such as problem–response structures in emails or background–action–follow-up patterns in reports. Analyzing authentic workplace texts allows students to see how coherence operates as a resource for efficient communication rather than as a formal requirement.

Third, register awareness should be integrated into routine English writing instruction. Comparative analysis of texts with different levels of formality can help students recognize how tone, word choice, and sentence structure reflect professional relationships. Such activities encourage students to view register control as a strategic choice rather than a fixed rule. This approach aligns with recent pedagogical recommendations that emphasize contextualized writing instruction in second language education [18].

Finally, feedback practices should be adjusted to balance linguistic accuracy with discourse-level concerns. While grammar-focused feedback remains necessary, teachers may also comment on task fulfillment, organizational clarity, and register appropriateness. By doing so, feedback can function not only as correction but also as guidance for future workplace-oriented English writing tasks.

6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the persistent challenges faced by applied English majors in transitioning from academic to workplace-oriented English writing, as evidenced by authentic classroom writing samples and observational data. The analysis identifies three core areas of difficulty: accurately interpreting task requirements, achieving organizational coherence, and controlling linguistic register. These issues are not merely superficial errors but appear deeply rooted in prior learning experiences, specifically the lingering influence of exam-centric writing practices and a corresponding lack of exposure to and practice with genuine workplace genres. By grounding the investigation in naturally occurring student texts rather than experimental data, this research provides a realistic portrait of the learning gap that exists within the vocational undergraduate context.

Furthermore, our study underscores a critical misalignment between traditional writing pedagogy and the communicative demands of professional environments. To address this, disconnect, instructional responses must move beyond generic writing correction and instead foster genre awareness and rhetorical flexibility. Practical measures should include the systematic analysis of authentic workplace texts, scaffolded simulations of real-world writing tasks, and explicit instruction on audience adaptation and purpose-driven organization. For applied English programs to fulfill their mandate of developing directly transferable skills, writing instruction must prioritize functional competence over purely formal accuracy. Ultimately, bridging this gap requires a curricular shift that immerses students in the discursive practices of their target professions, thereby equipping them not only with language skills but with the communicative strategies necessary for workplace success.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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