



Learning English through workplace communication: An evaluation of existing resources in Hong Kong



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ABSTRACT

The workplace has become increasingly volatile, intercultural and multilingual in the Information Age, presenting greater than ever communication challenges to employees. Accordingly, education reforms which recognise the growing significance of workplace communication competence have been put in place. In Hong Kong, an application-oriented elective module known as “Learning English through workplace communication” has been introduced to the senior secondary English language curriculum. This article surveys and evaluates a number of teaching and learning resources specially designed by relevant government bodies and commercial publishers for this module. Specifically, the professional genres which are covered in such resources are studied in detail, both qualitatively and quantitatively, to investigate the extent to which they parallel the professional discourses in the actual workplace, based on a comparison with findings from relevant research. Some discrepancies are found regarding the most frequently occurring genres and their linguistic realisations in the professional context and the teaching materials. Implications from the study and suggestions for pedagogical improvements are made not only with special reference to the local context, but also to the broader educational domain where workplace communication has increasingly become a key component in the language learning syllabus.

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1. Introduction

Workplace communication, sometimes termed interchangeably workplace discourse,¹ concerns how “organisational actors operate *in* communication and *through* discourse” (Jian, Schmisser, & Fairhurst, 2008, p. 314, italics in original) and covers a wide spectrum of occupational phenomena in institutional, professional and business settings (Koester, 2010). The significance of workplace communication in contemporary society is evidenced by the large number and diverse range of studies related to the field around the globe in the past two decades. In this Information Age, characterised by rapid global communications and networking, the contemporary workplace has undergone significant changes, making it increasingly volatile, intercultural and multilingual.

Traditionally associated with fixed geographical locations, the concept of the workplace has now turned highly mobile. With advances in technology, the emergence of small office/home office (SOHO) and flexi-time at work, the distinction between workplace and personal space has become blurred, which imposes more demands on employees, not least in communication. Coupled with this volatility is the intercultural and multilingual nature of the workplace, especially in

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¹ See Bargiela-Chiappini (2009) for a related discussion on the use of such similar yet not entirely synonymous terms in organisation studies.

the service industries. The prevalence of giant conglomerates, multinational corporations and international collaborations means that workplace communication is no longer confined to a single geographical region but often extends beyond countries and continents and involves participants from different national cultures and sub-cultures, at times communicating in more than one language, which presents further challenges to employees' linguistic command and cultural sensitivity. This is particularly true in many countries in Asia, where English, the dominant global lingua franca, is a second or foreign language.

For employees in this changing workplace within an increasingly globalised and knowledge-based world, the importance of effective workplace communication cannot be overstated. Poor communication at work may cause personal misunderstandings, lower organisational productivity, or even impede industrial or societal growth. Despite the importance of professional communication competence in the contemporary workplace and the dire consequences of professional communication failure as stated above, relatively little scholarly work has connected research and pedagogy. Specifically, very little work has been done to evaluate pedagogical materials specially designed for professional communication at the secondary school level based on authentic workplace communicative settings (c.f., e.g., [Chan, 2009](#); [Cheng, 2007](#); [Cheng & Cheng, 2010](#); [Cheng & Warren, 2005](#)). There is thus a lack of the comparison between what is expected of and practised by professionals in the workplace and what is taught to secondary school students in preparing them specifically for workplace communication, especially in the Asian ESL/EFL context. As such, it remains unclear how effective the existing teaching and learning resources specially designed for workplace communication are in equipping secondary school students for their future careers.

As an attempt to fill this gap, this article reports on an investigation which compares the actual workplace communication demands and the related training at school. Through a survey of the existing resources tailor-made for an elective module known as "Learning English through workplace communication" in the senior secondary English language curriculum in Hong Kong, this study examines specifically the professional genres which are covered in such resources and compares, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the extent to which they parallel the professional discourses in the actual workplace based on relevant findings from published research. Implications from the findings and pedagogical suggestions will be discussed towards the end of the article.

2. Workplace communication

2.1. Workplace communication research in Hong Kong

As the world's most services-oriented economy ([Hong Kong Trade Development Council, 2012](#)) and an important business hub both regionally and internationally, Hong Kong is uniquely poised to assume a prominent role in workplace communication research. Studies by Hong Kong-based scholars have been varied and multi-dimensional, showcasing the complexities in the contemporary workplace by addressing the volatile, intercultural and multilingual nature of workplace communication. In [Cheung's \(2008, 2010\)](#) studies, for instance, findings showed that the impact of the Internet on today's marketplace has changed the face of traditional sales letters, influencing the discourse structure and textual features of this genre when they are sent online through email marketing. In the banking industry, [Chew \(2005\)](#) illustrated the multilingual demands required of employees to carry out their daily communicative tasks effectively. In particular, Chew found that Cantonese is mainly used for spoken discourse and English for written discourse. Similarly, [Flowerdew and Wan \(2010\)](#) showed that the production process of audit reports in accounting involves a mix of languages including Cantonese, Mandarin and English, though the actual reports are in English. The intricate relationship between discourse processes and products is also examined in [Cheng and Mok \(2008\)](#), in which discursive events in land surveying are understood in relation to the concept of intertextuality. Again, written discourses by land surveyors are primarily in English and spoken discourses in Cantonese. Recently, [Ladegaard \(2011\)](#) showed that even in Sino-Western business negotiations conducted in English, linguistic accommodation may occur, reflecting the dynamic interaction and integration of languages commonly observed in professional discourse in the city.

2.2. Teaching workplace communication

With the rising interest in workplace communication research, more attention has been devoted to the teaching of workplace communication and its comparison with actual workplace practices. In a seminal study by [Williams \(1988\)](#), the language suggested for use in meetings from 30 business English textbooks was compared with that in actual business meetings between native English engineers. It was found that the proposed exponents of functions in the textbooks examined hardly corresponded to those realised in naturally-occurring business meetings. This lack of correspondence between textbook prescriptions and workplace observations is also highlighted more recently in [Angouri \(2010a, 2010b\)](#), where mismatches were found between descriptions from six best-selling business English textbooks in the UK and observations from authentic workplaces in seven multinational companies in Europe in the areas of cultural representation and turn-taking respectively.

Another important research area in the study of workplace teaching materials is intertextuality, as the production and comprehension of workplace discourse requires reference to previous related texts. In this connection, [Bremner \(2008\)](#) examined the references to and uses of pre-existing real-life workplace texts in eight business communication textbooks and found that the textbooks played down the role of such previous texts by alluding to but not providing the texts. The

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