

Young Executives' Perceptions on The Purpose of Using Writing Software

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Abstract

Most young executives prepare documents by using a computer since it is helpful in assisting them in the writing process. Although word processing software is most popularly used, it only provides support for the purpose of formatting, thesaurus, tracking, spell checking and grammar checking. The actual writing process requires more support, thus some efforts have been made to develop software tools that can help executives in performing their tasks. Based on an ongoing research that aims to develop a Computer-Aided Writing Workbench for Young Executives (CAWWYE), this paper will discuss the perceptions of young executives relating to the purpose of using software writing tools to help them in writing documents. Among the focus on the purposes of using the software include grammar checking, spell checking and style checking.

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1. Introduction

The burgeoning interest in computer application in the 21st century has enhanced new areas of research and this includes researches that focus on the development of software. One of the promising areas that require investigation is the development of tools in computer-aided language application. Of the many new developments in computer aided language application is in the writing component.

The role of automated tools has become increasingly important within language application over the past six decades or so. Writing automation has its undisputed impact on its target users thus it deserves due considerations for selection of suitable tools for specific purposes and specific users. However, the burgeoning arrays of current available language tools may not serve the writing functions they claim to have, at least not as required by some users. This paper focuses on a preliminary findings relating to the perceptions of young executives in multi-national companies in Malaysia relating to the purpose of using writing software as tools to help them in writing documents at workplace.

2. Literature Review

Writing may not be an easy task especially writing in a language which is developing, rich and diverse and constantly evolving. This includes the English language. Writing for specific purposes and for a specific larger industry is even harder as today's society demands effective writing.

The importance of writing and writing effectively at workplace are discussed by many, with reference to writing among professionals. For instance, Tg Nor Rizan et al (2008) discuss how studies showed the importance of written workplace literacy for professionals at workplace which has become more challenging as present. This is may be interpreted as workplace demands that only consider effective writing but also efficiency. Today, workplaces integrate Information Communication Technology

(ICT) in their daily tasks. The computer obviously plays a very important role to enable efficiency and effectiveness in writing. Palmquist & Zimmerman (1999:3) suggest that as one considers the writing process and strategies, he should also think how the computer can help support him as the word processing program can help to write more efficiently and effectively. In view of electronic writing as part of the 21st-century tools for effective communication, Booher (2007) suggests reviewing of written documents in terms of grammar and style apart from content, layout, clarity and conciseness to ensure effective writing, and this is made possible with writing tools.

On the contrary, digital writing had been a separation of computers and writing skills until the era of ICT where globalization has reconciled many sub-disciplines together. There had been no due concern to face many questions in relation to digital writing. However, recently the use of computers for writing has shown improvements and this is seen through researches in the development software in terms of pedagogical practices and perceived learning effectiveness in EFL writing, methods in writers' digital writing (Chen & Cheng 2008; De Pew & Miller 2005).

Design and evaluation of writing tools become a major concern to evaluate educational environment and many researchers concern themselves in evaluation of specific language environment. Researches in evaluating language software include deriving a framework for evaluation of computer-aided software engineering (Senapathy 2005) and a proposal of a hybrid model for cognitive and software engineering approaches (Plass 1998).

In assessing writing tools, evaluation of software criteria is vast but confined to views from commercial magazines or product vendors. For obvious reasons the reviews on software products do not provide a fair view against actual requirement from end-users' stand point. For language environment, the growing numbers of writing tools with an array of features and components claimed by the product developers, generate a need of evaluation on writing software from a different perspective.

Attempts to identify and evaluate suitable writing software may result in various implications. This is because despite their comprehensive list of criteria, software for writing may not meet the required criteria for specific targeted end-users. Evaluation of writing software can have various interpretations but for the purpose of this paper, focus will be on the perceptions of end-users in using writing tools. A checklist is used to observe respondents' view in relation to the functions and use of writing tools in terms of writing elements, among which are spell-checking, grammar and style checking extracted for discussion in this paper.

3. CELW Research Background

Computer-Enhanced Language Writing (CELW) (see link: http://calw.thinkwhyhow.com/index_files/Page431.htm) is a research group that is interested to harness computer technology in assisting English as a Second Language (ESL) learners at institutions of higher learning to improve on their academic writing. We are also interested to assist executives to write better at their workplace. The title of the UKM-GUP-TMK-07-03-031 project is Evaluation and Integration of Available Software Tools for Developing Computer-Aided Writing Workbench for Young Malaysian Executives (CAWWYE).

4. Preliminary Findings and Discussion

Perhaps, it is wise to start the discussion with the participants' background before presenting the results. The participants, after all, determine the significance of the data which in turn serves as a parameter to favor the development of a computer-aided writing workbench. Their designation, academic background and years of experience represent the fact whether the responses gathered really come from a reliable source – a group of people who have had enough experience in writing and know exactly what they need to help improve writing.

The designation will determine if the job scope and tasks they face in writing are in diversity because that certainly spells different form of writing tasks performed by different group of employers. From the survey of the 64 participants, executives form the majority of the group (46.9%) followed by assistant researchers (28.1%), investigation officers (12.5%), researchers (7.8%), and finally head of unit (4.7%). As what can be seen, heterogeneity is moderate since there are basically three different groups of professions: executives who perform most of the writing tasks in a company, researchers who work in the area of research and development whose main job is to experiment and report their new findings, and the senior officers who are entrusted to perform the more important, critical duties and to proofread the junior executives' writings.

As far as the academic background is concerned, 79.6% are first degree holders, 9.4% with a master's degree, 4.7% with a diploma, 3.1% ACCA holders, 1.6% of STPM certificate and 1.6% being unresponsive. Despite their qualifications, it seems that they still need help in writing. This, however, lies within the problem of language per se. Since English is a second language to many, it is no surprise that local people would want help writing in the language. Regardless of how competent a person may be, he still commits language errors and mistakes at times even in his first language, let alone a language that is not practiced daily.

Most of these participants have had a great number of years of work experience. This in fact implies that the results may be highly dependable since they come from a group of experienced workers who are believed to be producing countless numbers of writings at the workplace. With 53.1% of them been working between 1 to 3 years, 21.9% with 3 to 5 years of work experience, 12.5% having more than 5 years of experience, only 10.9% with less than 1 year of experience and the remaining 1.6% being unresponsive, this group of participants are tremendously reliable.

Basically, these findings have provided significant insights and thus will be a remarkable gage since more than 80% of the participants believed that each item is of

importance. Even from the four scales of importance i.e. very important, important, less important and not important, no single participant believed that the items are of no importance except for translating with as low as 1.6%.

Spelling check tops the priority of the executives as 92.2% of them believed it is an important aspect during writing. Probably because English is an inconsistent language when it comes to the pronunciation, the participants believed they will have problems with English spelling. Also, spelling may be perceived as important since it is the most conspicuous mistake that people notice at a glance. However this view may not be shared by 6.2% of the participants who thought it is a less important aspect and 1.6% who failed to provide any response at all.

As far as grammar check is concerned, the aspect obtains the second highest percentage in terms of the degree of importance among participants. 90.7% found it important, 7.8% thought it was less important and 1.6% did not provide any answer. Since grammar has always been a priority in learning English and further validated by the teachers who have been correcting it since primary schools, many second language learners believe it is an important aspect. To a certain extent, they are right. Wrong grammar not only reflects the learners' incompetence but also may deliver conflicting message from what is intended. For instance, the use of simple past tense in the place of a present tense in writings when referring to a person will undoubtedly invite assumption that the poor person is no longer alive among the readers.

Style check receives a fair place among the participants. Only 84.3% agreed that it is an important area when writing, whereas 14.1% did not think so and 1.6% did not even respond. The reason local executives did not put an emphasis on this element is probably due to the nature that they communicate mainly with other local people even though the writing is in English. With similar cultural interpretation, style check is not a priority. As long as people understand the message they think it is all they need. Although politeness which is covered by style checker indicates effective

communication, that is necessary only when delivering bad news. If it calls for stating facts or informing, they may not need this as much

5. Conclusion

The preliminary analysis and findings of this paper suggest that the three writing elements namely spelling, grammar and style which are considered important in writing provides a significant implication to the research. The perceptions of young executives in multi-national companies in Malaysia regarding the importance of these elements in writing using the computer implies the criteria that needs to be considered in developing a writing software for local use.

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