

***Investigating Students' Problems in Understanding their Personal Qualities and Skills for Cover Letters – A Self-Assessment Approach***

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**Abstract**

This paper explores students' problems in presenting their personal qualities in cover letters for job application and examines the effectiveness of self-assessment approach in countering these problems. This study adopts the action research approach, and the research methods used are content analysis, individual interview and self-assessment feedback. The research procedure consists of a three-stage approach. The researchers comprise four English instructors who also act as participant-observers in their language classrooms and collaborators in this action project. The objective of the research is to identify the problems faced by the selected learners in writing relevant information on their personal qualities and their strategies in overcoming the problems based on their own self-assessment feedback. Primarily, this study focuses on the presentation of both technical and soft skills in the cover letters. Based on the content analysis and the students' self-assessment feedback, it was found that generally, the cover letters produced in the post-intervention demonstrated clearer and much more effective content. Specifically, it was found that students were able to do their own self-assessment by providing relevant and specific personal information that promotes personal qualities and skills in their cover letters.

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## **Introduction**

This paper investigates students' problems in understanding their personal qualities for cover letters and how the knowledge about self-assessment approach helps them to gather relevant personal information in the process writing of cover letters for job application among six second language learners who took a workplace communication course at a Malaysian public university. In particular, this study is an action research project. The research methods used are content analysis and individual interview. The research procedure consists of the three-stage approach, the pre-, while- and post- intervention stages. In the premise of this study, action research, similar to other forms of inquiry, is perceived as value laden (Herr and Anderson 2005) as it enables changes in the classroom learning with subsequent monitoring. The researchers consist of four English instructors who also act as participant-observers in their language classrooms and collaborators in this action research project.

The main objective of conducting this action research is to identify the problems faced by students in writing relevant information on personal qualities to display professionalism. It is also to investigate whether students' use of the self-assessment approach help them to gather relevant personal information problems or errors in the selected students' cover letters and to provide the necessary teaching and learning input and strategies to counter the problems identified.

This paper consists of eight segments. First, this paper will present the background of the study. Second, a brief background of literature review is presented, followed by third, a brief description of the course, participants and teachers. The fourth segment outlines the research objectives and research questions. Fifth, the research methodology, methods and procedure are explained briefly and subsequently, the sixth segment will explain the analysis of the findings. Seventh, implications to classroom contexts will be highlighted followed by the final section, the conclusion.

## **Background of the Study**

### **Malaysian workplace and employment scenario: the mismatch of workplace requirements**

The increasing unemployment rate among the fresh graduates in Malaysia is a worrying trend. Majority of them are ignorant of the expectation from them in the employment market. They lack understanding of the term employability which is a set of achievement skills, understanding and personal qualities that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke, 2008). There is a gap between student's perspective of employability and employers' perspective, which needs immediate bridging.

Based on the group's previous research, the findings show that students cannot sell themselves through cover letters. Thus, in this research, the aim is to explore student's problems in writing relevant information that promotes character building/personal

qualities to display professionalism in composing cover letter for job seeking in the industry.

The full *Graduates' Work: Organisational change and students' attributes* 2012/2013 report states that undergraduates can develop their skills through their programme of study and work-experience opportunities. Students will analyse their personal and interactive qualities that are required for success in the workplace. According to *Personal Life Skills Centre Handbook* and the OCR document '*Admin Guide: Vocational Qualifications*' (A850) 2011, students will have the opportunity to audit personal qualities through self-assessment and feedback from peers and teachers in order to plan for success in the workplace. This study employs self-assessment approach through class activities and inviting managers from the industry to present talks on the professional qualities that employers most commonly seek in employees.

### **Brief overview of literature**

In writing a cover letter, Whitmell (2010) states candidates to stop telling employers they are a 'creative and resourceful team player' because he claims that it's what everyone else writes. Instead, he asks potential candidates to highlight specific skills, achievements and relevant personality traits. He added that a cover letter links the resume to the specific requirements of the job and the company. Rather than repeating information from the resume, candidates are advised to grab the attention of the hiring manager by highlighting and expanding on relevant personality traits, strengths and experience.

Adam Kaveney cited in Whitmell (2010) also states that a cover letter is a great opportunity to let the personality shines through. To quote he says, "Blend in personality traits with the skills/accomplishments that will be of interest — especially if they add extra context to your application. Adding this sort of personal information gives the reader a bigger picture than just a summary of the facts on your CV."

According to Curtis (2009), after you have introduced yourself and your professional background, expand on key strengths by providing more details that support the first paragraph. In the second paragraph, she explains how a person's skills and achievements will translate into success for the prospective employer. For example, in writing for Information Technology (IT) cover letters, it is extremely important to incorporate the person's soft skills. Soft skills are communication, interpersonal, and presentation skills. An unbeatable IT cover letter explains how you have used both technical and soft skills to affect positive change.

Depending on the position says McSween (2014), there are specific skills necessary to perform jobs in different fields. He states that candidates should be knowledgeable about graphic computer programs. The cover letter should provide in-depth information about the technical skills, including education, language and computer skills. He gives an example. To quote he says, "In my last position, I worked extensively with a proprietary database management program to track the company's inventory."

McSween (2014) also highlights the importance of Personal Character Traits. He added that a cover letter should describe a person's personal traits by highlighting his or her strengths and work style. He further advises candidates to use descriptive words that will best display his or her skills that will stand out from the crowd. Employers are interested in learning more about your personal character and how you will succeed working for their company. In a cover letter, he says you can write, "I am a quick learner and enjoy working in a team environment."

Consequently, synthesizing information and ideas about their personal qualities, technical skills and soft skills and experiences to suit their chosen job advertisements prove to be a daunting task when they are composing the cover letters. This is because these skills involve selecting the most relevant ideas and information and subsequently, organizing and synthesizing these ideas and information and later, further transforming and reworking these ideas and information to fit the requirements of the job advertisement and workplace contexts.

Besides that, since the course was a university course therefore, the students also need to follow the procedures dictated by the course where they had to deal with instructors and discuss their writings with them during conferencing sessions and underwent other evaluation tasks. Therefore, it is interesting to see how teacher intervention during the continuum of the students' writing process in composing their personal qualities in cover letters using the self-assessment approach will assist students in improving the final versions of their technical skills and soft skills in writing their cover letters.

### **Brief descriptions of the course, participants and teachers**

In this study, the course involved Workplace Communication II (WCII) course. This paper focuses on six students/participants and four teachers who are also collaborators and participant-observers in this action research study.

Before taking this course, these students had already taken the compulsory Academic Communication I course, which assisted them with their needs for academic skills. Students are required to pass the course as a pre-requisite for their graduation requirements. Once they have completed the course, those students who attained grades A or A- for Academic Communication I are required to take the exit course, which is WCII. Similarly, this course was offered as a compulsory subject and students need to obtain passing grades.

WCII is as an exit course, which complements Academic Communication I as WCII is offered to equip the students with the necessary workplace knowledge and skills as preparation for their industrial training exercises and future working needs. WCII course is offered twice a week with two-hour session each, for fourteen weeks in a semester. This course comprises two major components, first, the job application component and second, the Project component. However, based on this study's objectives and aims, this study will only investigate the first component, the job application component, with a focus chiefly on the students' skill in writing relevant information on personal qualities in their cover letters to display professionalism. This study will not consider the sub-component, which is resume writing.

In this paper, the focus will be on the selected six undergraduates, who were second language learners from three different faculties. 1 students from the Faculty of Economy and Management (FEP), 1 from the Faculty of Science and Technology (FST) and 1 from Faculty of Islamic Studies (FPI) who were undertaking WCII. The table below provides a brief summary of the learners' backgrounds. The learners are coded as digits to ensure anonymity and privacy.

NO	STUDENT	YEAR	MUET BAND
1.	1	2	3
2.	2	2	4
3.	3	2	3

The researchers of this study were the English instructors of the four selected English language classes of Workplace Communication 2. These instructors play a three-pronged role in this study, first, as class instructors, second, as participant-observers and third, as collaborators of this study. Most of the teachers have taught English as a second language for more than 20 years. The courses are Proficiency, Academic and Occupational and courses dealing with young and adult learners.

Next, the research objectives and research questions are outlined in the following section.

### **Research objectives and research questions**

The research objectives of this study are as follows:

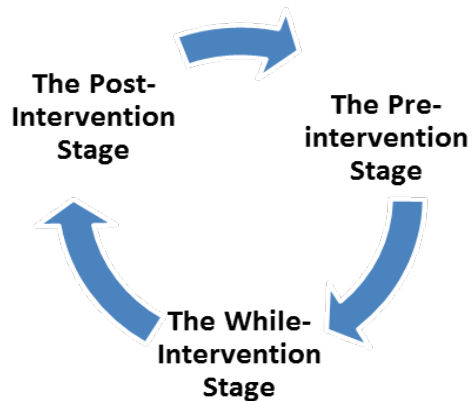
1. To investigate the problems faced by students in writing relevant information on personal qualities to display professionalism.
2. To investigate how the knowledge of self-assessment approach helps students to gather relevant personal information.

The research questions of this study are:

1. What are the the problems faced by students in writing relevant information on personal qualities to display professionalism?
2. How the knowledge about self-assessment approach help students to gather relevant personal information?

### **Research methodology**

In broad, this study adopts the action research methodology. There are two research methods employed which are first, content analysis of the selected students' cover letters in writing relevant information on personal qualities in both pre- and post-interventions. Secondly, individual interviews with the selected students/participants to find out whether the students have used the self-assessment approach to gather relevant personal information to be included in their cover letters. In brief, the research procedure in this study encompasses three stages.



### **The three-stage cycle**

The diagram above illustrates the three-stage approach adopted by this study, which comprised the pre-, while- and post interventions. In brief, in the pre-intervention, learners wrote the cover letters in class on their own without assistance from their teachers or peers. In the while-intervention, the instructors gave relevant input on the required personal information that students need to include as part of content in their cover letters that will project professionalism. In the post intervention, students re-wrote their cover letters based on the input they received from their respective teachers and their self-assessment strategies.

Prior, each of these students had to search and select one job advertisement that best suit their areas of specialization. Also, all chosen job advertisements had to be approved by their English instructors before the students could proceed using them as part of their job application process.

In the pre-intervention stage, the researchers cum participant-observers chose the first lesson in Week 2 to conduct the first round of draft writing of the cover letter in their respective classes. The selected learners were given one hour in class to compose their cover letters based on their selected job advertisements. At this stage, it is presumed that these learners had yet to be formally taught the professional format and convention of a cover letter and in particular, the relevant personal information required. At the end of this first lesson, the researchers collected all the drafts and marked them accordingly. The next segment will discuss the findings of the first drafts of the students' cover letters.

### **Analysis of the findings**

Based on the analysis of the findings, generally there were positive changes in the content of the cover letters produced by the students. The discussion of the analysis will be divided into two categories, firstly the problem in writing relevant information on personal qualities to display professionalism and secondly, the effectiveness of students' self-assessment strategies in helping them to gather relevant personal information in improving their cover letters.

In this first segment of analysis, the paper will discuss the students' problems in writing to improve the content focusing on personal qualities and skills in cover

letters. The discussion will answer the first research question, *What are the the problems faced by students in writing relevant information on personal qualities so as to display professionalism?*

The findings discussed in this section were based on the students’ first drafts of their cover letters written during the pre-intervention stage. The researchers collected and analyzed these drafts in terms of the students’ presentation of skills in writing their personal qualities. Basically, the teachers analysed and focused chiefly on the second, third and fourth paragraphs in the cover letters. These paragraphs represented the students’ educational background, technical skills and soft skills. The table below summarized the identified problems in their cover letters.

The table summarizes the students’ personal qualities and skills that have been identified in the pre and post cover letters. The findings consist of these three areas: First, the selected students lacked awareness about the importance of identifying relevant personal qualities and hence, did not include them in their cover letters. Second, these students also did not know how to go about organising the relevant information in the required paragraphs. Third, these students also did not give details or elaborations for their personal qualities. The table shows the summary of students’ problems in writing their personal details in cover letters.

Subsequently, based on these findings, the teachers/participant-observers designed an intervention input for class lesson/activity that deals specifically with the problems identified. This class activity was carried out during the while-intervention stage. After that stage was completed, the teachers conducted the post-intervention stage where students re-wrote their cover letters based on the teachers’ intervention. Based on the analysis of these re-written cover letters, several findings were made. These findings are presented in the next segment.

		STUDENT 1 (S1)	STUDENT 2 (S2)	STUDENT 3 (S3)
PERSONAL QUALITIES	PRE	No mention	No mention	Highly motivated Like challenges
	POST	Self-esteem Honesty Leadership Tolerance Understanding enthusiasm	Team player Independent Efficient commitment	Independent Highly motivated Like challenges
SKILLS	PRE	No mention	No mention	No mention
	POST	Communication counselling	Interpersonal	Computer Accounting Communication

Specifically, as stated in the table, it was found that all the selected students performed poorly in their attempt to write the relevant information on personal

qualities and skills during the pre-intervention stage. It was identified that the reasons behind this failure to do so are multipronged.

As shown in the table, the selected students lacked awareness about the importance of identifying relevant personal qualities and skills in their cover letters. Next, these students did not give details or elaborations for their personal qualities. In addition, these students did not know how to go about organising this information in the required paragraphs.

A case in point, student (S3) only managed to simply highlight his or her skills without further substantiating and elaborating the points. In her pre-cover letter, she merely mentioned some of the qualities without further elaborating. Moreover, the skills were messy and not properly organized. However, in her post cover letter, she was able to organize her ideas well by mentioning all relevant skills.

On the other hand, most of the points in student (S2) cover letter were irrelevant to the job applied. She mainly highlighted the company's reputation. For the post cover letter, she was still writing about the company but she added some of her personal qualities. In the case of student (S1), none of the details provided reflect the students' background and skills in his/her pre cover letters. However, student (S1) made a remarkable improvement in his/her post cover letter by including both personal qualities and skills.

Some of the reasons of their failures to identify and present their personal qualities and skills clearly and in organized manner in their pre cover letters were revealed during the individual interviews conducted immediately after the pre-intervention stage. All students indicated that their inability to write effective and relevant information on personal qualities were due to lack of knowledge and exposure. The students have never written any cover letters before even though some have actually had work experienced. From the feedback, they did not have to write any cover letters when they applied for the job.

In this second segment of analysis, the paper will discuss the effectiveness of students' self-assessment strategies. The discussion will answer the second research question, *How does the knowledge about self-assessment approach helps students to gather relevant personal information?*

Immediately after the pre-intervention stage, the first individual interview was conducted. Below are some of the responses given by the students. A case in point, when the students were asked whether they know how to go about writing a cover letter, some of the responses given are;

*S1 – “No, I searched during class using smartphone.”*

*S2 – “I know a little about format but not anything about content.”*

These responses indicated clearly that some of the students did not have the relevant knowledge that would enable them to make informed strategies about how to go about writing a clear and effective cover letters. The finding also shows that some students resorted to other learning resources for instance using the smartphone to surf for



information or samples. However, one student revealed that his or her past experience somehow assisted him or her in writing the cover letter,

*S3 - "I can remember some of the format because I used to write cover letter in Malay"*

This finding suggests that even if the knowledge of writing cover letters is in another language, students can still utilise that knowledge and apply it in the new context of writing a cover letter in the English language. This also strongly supports schema theory that previous knowledge or experiences assisted students to tackle problems in new contexts.

Interestingly, student (S2) on the contrary, explained that she did some guessing work when she disclosed, "I guess that it should be formal because write to company and the content should briefly explain about myself why I apply the job". This is an interesting finding because it also indicates that despite having no previous knowledge or background on the format and convention of a cover letter, the student was engaged in some 'calculated' guessing work about how to go about tackling the task of writing a cover letter. In this case, the student rationalised that since the task involved writing to a company, this automatically made the task formal in nature.

Broadly, it was found that most of the students gained awareness from the teachers' intervention given during the class. During the second individual interview conducted immediately after the post-intervention stage, the students indicated positive answers when referred to writing their personal qualities. All the students were able to do self-assessment by providing relevant and specific personal information that promote personal qualities and skills in their cover letters. This is shown in some of the students' reflection of themselves. Below are some of the responses given by them:

*S1 - "I looked back at activities and programs that I have participated"*

*S2 - "I figure out whether fulfill requirements, skills and personal qualities"*

*S3 - "I think of my experience, my advantage and assessed myself before listing down my knowledge and capabilities to suit the job requirements"*

Additionally, based on student (S3) statement, to quote, "the content should briefly explain about myself why I apply the job". It can be inferred that the student also went on to theorise that since the cover letter is a job application document, it is only logical that the cover letter should contain brief information about her personal details on why she had chosen to apply at the company. This strategy of self-assessment reveals that all students have the ability to include their personal qualities and skills when writing their cover letters.

Generally, the analysis revealed that the teacher intervention had successfully socialized learners into acquiring English for Occupational purposes and also, the format, structure and content required for writing a cover letter. The analysis also revealed that there was a significant improvement in the patterns of cover letters written in the post-intervention stage compared to the ones written in the pre-intervention stage. However, at the same time, it was also discovered that despite being given intervention, some learners were still unable to produce clear and concise

personal qualities and skills in their cover letters. It was found that some of the contributing factors that hindered their progress were related to lack of learner-readiness, and knowledge of and familiarity with workplace contexts and requirements.

### **Implication to the classroom context**

The findings of this study suggest that there is a significant value in the teacher intervention in assisting learners to improve on their skills of writing cover letters. Two indicators reveal this; the selected students' self-assessment feedbacks and the general improvement of the content in terms of personal qualities and skills in their cover letters produced after the intervention.

Some of the key discoveries made that can be included in this section are firstly, self-assessment approach reveal students' problems and their related strategies that enable them to cope with writing cover letters which are new experiences/unfamiliar tasks to them. Secondly, teacher intervention assists the selected students in becoming more aware of the importance of identifying their personal qualities and skills and highlighting them in a much clearer and more organised and effective ways in their cover letters.

### **Conclusion**

In retrospect, as shown by this study, teacher intervention plays an important role in facilitating learners to do become more aware of their own learning when they engage in self-assessment approach. Teacher intervention also enables the students to identify their personal qualities and skills required by the job advertisement of their choices. Thus, summarily, these findings demonstrate that the teacher intervention is generally effective in assisting the selected students to focus on their personal qualities and skills and become more empowered and independent in their own learning processes.

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