A study on Improving the English Writing Skills of Higher Secondary Students in Meghalaya, India, Through a Three-Week Module.

April, 2012

By Evarisha M Syiem

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Importance of Communicating through writing in English

Communication through writing is an extremely critical component of education, livelihood, and basic functionality in a society. Especially, in higher education where English happens to be the medium of instruction, writing is extremely important because it is used extensively in communicating with professors, employers, peers, or just about anyone else.

Problems faced by students using English as a Second Language

However, the ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practice in formal instructional settings or other environments. Further, the students’ skill in writing in a second language is faced with several challenges. There can be many social as well as cognitive reasons for this, such as a negative attitude towards the target language, cultural distance between them and the target language, and lack of motivation. Students are even ignorant of the basic rules and structural patterns which they are supposed to have learnt at the school level. Some EFL teachers may be perplexed by such problems in their writing classes and are unable to find an efficient way to awaken students’ imagination and set their minds working. As a result, students feel that using the English language amidst all their doubts and uncertainties is a cumbrous affair.

Besides the reasons mentioned above, another major hurdle that students face is the dearth of time to practise writing in the classroom, with the teacher available for clarifying their doubts. Coping with the pressure to complete a set syllabus, teachers hardly have the time to
allow students to practise writing. Writing is a skill and like any other skill, being fluent in it requires plenty of practice.

**Need for a New Paradigm in teaching English writing skills**

Teaching English as a second language, especially writing skills, can vary according to the cultural and academic environment. The situation in North East India can be quite different from other parts of India due to the high literacy rates as well as a predominantly Christian population, with its innovative practices of ritual and rites. Thus, a new paradigm will be needed to explain the process of developing writing skills in this area, which is the major focus of the research.

Studies of second language writing are sadly lacking, and little research done on the L2 writing process among indigenous populations. Students who have learnt to converse and write in vernacular in their school education, and rather minimally or not at all in English, would then find communication at the University level rather difficult and frustrating, unless necessary help is provided to prepare them properly. This is especially true in Meghalaya, where there are both external and internal constraints related to the Learner-achievement levels among tribal students. While there are many courses to enhance the spoken English and oral communication, very little work is reported on how to improve the writing skills. There is a great need, therefore, to study the problems faced by the students and then develop suitable strategies to improve their writing skills in English, keeping in mind the dearth of time in the academic year.

**Research Objectives**

This research project explored the development of a short module to demystify the skill of writing. It allows the students to practise writing alongside the teacher’s assistance and guidance. It involves students who, although are not native users of the English language, yet have learned and used it in speech through their school years. The aim of this research
was to develop a training course to improve the English writing skills of higher secondary students, particularly, in Meghalaya. The specific objectives are to develop a feasible and cost-time-effective training module for enhancing the writing skills in English; secondly, to evaluate its effectiveness and validate its applicability; and finally to identify further research strategies on teaching-learning methodologies in English writing.

**Methodology adopted in this Research**

Based on selected research articles published on this topic, conceptual and theoretical frameworks for the research were designed. Modules of varying duration and intensity were formulated and shared with experienced teachers and some parents, as well as with a representative sample of high school students and older students. It was generally agreed that skills in letter writing should be the first part of the module, followed by writing English compositions. Necessary training in English vocabulary, and gradual expansion of their grasp of new vocabulary and essential grammar was also considered essential, to be instructed in a gradual manner.

With this preparation, research was done on identifying the most appropriate content as well as method of instruction. Given the academic pressures, it was finally decided to have three-week course, with the content adjusted accordingly. The prototype of the course was shared with students, parents and teachers and the module finalized in terms of hours and timings of instruction, additional home assignments, and the graded sessions over a period of three weeks. Evaluations were planned at the end of each week. The tentative training module was subjected to a pilot study in one school, and analysed in terms of its acceptance, effectiveness and theoretical soundness, based on which it was modified and fine-tuned for a proper randomized controlled trial.

**Study Design and Sample selected for the Research**
A list of higher secondary schools in Shillong was prepared, and these schools were approached for their cooperation and suitability to participate in the trial. Based on their consent and suitability, 4 similar schools were chosen, from which a random allocation was made with 2 schools to test the new module and the other 2 as matching controls. The study was done in pairs, one experimental and one control, at a time. The schools were visited and discussions held with the Administration and concerned teachers. An Orientation programme was drawn up for the students.

**Data Collection, Management and Statistical Analyses**

While the experimental schools were administered the newly developed module, the control schools were given a traditional reading and writing courses over the period of three weeks. For all the groups mentioned above, the same procedure was followed as to the sequence of the study. First, a Pretest was given followed by the three-week training for the Experimental groups and a normal reading training for the Control groups. At the end of each of the weeks, posttests were given to assess and evaluate the students’ performance. Assessments were made at the end of each week in both the schools using a standardized system. At the end of three weeks, a Feed-back form was filled by the students on their comments regarding the course, the positive and negative aspects, the learning that occurred and their confidence built, as well as their suggestions for improvement.

Data were entered onto Microsoft Excel sheets, checked for completeness and accuracy and monitored weekly. Statistical analysis was done using SPSS, calculating the differences between pre-course levels and post-course levels at the end of first week, second week and third week. Paired t-test was used to determine the statistical significance of the change in Letter writing and Composition writing skills. These changes in the Experimental Group and the Control group were tested for statistical significance using the t-test and Chi-square test. Frequency distributions, Means and Standard
Deviations were computed as well as Correlation and Regression coefficients. Finally, an ANOVA was done on the final scores at the end of three weeks, between the Experimental and Control groups. Diagrams were drawn to supplement the tables.

**Findings and Conclusions**

The Pilot study was conducted with a total of 114 students, in one representative school. In the randomized controlled trial, there were 114 children in the experimental group and 128 in the control schools. The average age of the children was 16 to 17 years.

The findings from the research studies have shown that the new module has been effective in teaching writing skills, and there was a statistically significant difference in the performance of students who underwent the new 3-week programme as compared to controls.

The students expressed satisfaction over the benefits of the training programme, and found it convenient and useful in the long run. Some students mentioned that the course did not help to the extent expected, as they had difficulties in doing the required homework, additional reading and other exercises.

Conclusions were made that it is possible to teach English writing skills for secondary school level students based on proper pedagogical principles within 3 weeks. The course should include both class-room teaching and home assignments and the emphasis should be on interactive teaching and active learning by the students’ participation. The practice sessions should be logically arranged from simple to complex, from letter-writing to free compositions. Ample opportunities should be provided for informal feed-back, corrections and revisions.

**Recommendations**
The final training module was made keeping to the duration of three weeks (vide Annex 1). A Training Guide was prepared for the teachers to use along with the required reading/other training material (Annex 2).

It is recommended that the new module be widely advertised and tested in other environments to make suitable refinements and adjustments.