

**Towards a Synthetic, Balanced Approach to Teaching Writing Skills to Students of
Technical Institutes in India**

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Introduction

One of the problems which has always dogged the teaching of writing skills in English classroom in India in general is the overemphasis on the correctness of the grammar of sentences rather than the expression of ideas through and across them. There is no gainsaying that a focus on the accuracy, correctness and appropriateness of sentences is an important aspect in the teaching of writing skills for effective communication often hinges on these aspects of language use. Utmost care should, therefore, be taken to ensure that learners are made aware of the importance of grammatical aspects like subject-verb agreement, correct use of pronouns and articles, no shift in tense and voice, and also the use of punctuation marks. However, the problem arises when the focus on grammar becomes the sole aim of a writing class, as is often the case in the Indian context, relegating the issues with regard to both the processes of composition and the ways in which discourses are constructed to the back burner. Tickoo quite eloquently describes what usually happens in a typical English composition class in India in the following manner:

1. The teacher sets a writing task.
2. The pupils write a composition and hand it in.
3. The teacher corrects its grammar and spelling often using a lot of red ink, or asks the pupils to either copy the model composition written by him/her or follow the one found in their composition book.
4. The pupils look at the teacher's corrections.
5. They (may) hurriedly rewrite or make changes to satisfy the teacher. (57)

Not only is this methodology of teaching by testing fundamentally wrong, but this also leaves the learner absolutely unaware of the processes involved in writing a composition. Moreover, since the emphasis here is only on the production of correct grammatical sentences, the

discoursal features of a composition are almost totally ignored. The learners are usually made aware of the grammatical correctness or otherwise of sentences but are not taught the strategies of carrying forward their grammatical knowledge to the ability to write well. The same sad story occurs more often than not in the English classes of students studying in technical institutes as well. The author can vouch for this since he has been involved in teaching a course titled *Communication Skills in English* for B. Tech. students of the School of Technology of Assam University, Silchar.

A synthetic, balanced approach: The need of the hour

In the context of the above, the author proposes a synthetic, balanced approach to the teaching of writing skills, especially keeping the requirement of students studying in technical institutes in mind. This approach, attempting to strike a balance between *talking about* writing and *setting up* tasks which learners do singly, or in pairs, or in groups in the language class, entails the following features:

1. A focus on enabling learners to understand how paragraphs are developed and how cohesion is achieved across sentences through linguistic means so that the sentences in and across paragraphs hang together as part of a discoursal text and do not appear to be a mere assembly of words.
2. A focus on brevity and grammatical and conceptual clarity, apart from accuracy, as important aspects of effective written communication.
3. A focus on the process of writing comprising a series of activities involving the generation of ideas through brainstorming, planning how the ideas resulting from the brainstorming session(s) can be organised effectively, drafting and reviewing before coming out with the final piece.
4. A focus on enabling the learners to develop an awareness of the characteristic features of different genre or text types like, for instance, email messages, abstracts of articles, technical reports, blurbs of novels, etc. in order that they are able to see how these text types determine grammatical choices.

Focus on paragraph development and cohesion in writing

As has already been mentioned, the teaching of writing skills in India in general has sadly been limited usually to teaching (and testing) the learners' knowledge of grammar items, without a focus on the importance of the discoursal features which contribute to the construction of written texts. This has to do largely with the very notion of writing that English teachers in India usually hold. Writing is generally associated with good handwriting, choice of lexis and knowledge of grammar. There is no gainsaying that all these are important aspects of writing for good handwriting obviously enhances the aesthetic appeal of a handwritten piece, and a felicity of expression using proper grammatical sentences goes a long way in making a piece of writing effective. However, if the focus of a writing class is merely on these, the focus inevitably then is at the level of the sentence, and the communication of ideas using longer texts where sentences are fastened together and cross-linked, which is the declared objective of any writing class, takes a beating. Hence, the paragraph has to be the basic unit of writing, and the focus has to be on the fluency of expression along with the correctness of grammar. Unfortunately, this is not something usually happening in writing classes in India in general and the so-called 'communicative English' classes in technical institutes in particular. Of course, there are the usual 'paragraph writing' and 'letter writing' exercises but little attention is paid to enabling learners to understand how paragraphs are developed in the first place. In this context, it is pertinent perhaps to point out that there has to be a focus on both how a paragraph should emerge from or lead to the topic sentence, which contains its main idea, and how cohesion is achieved in sentences in and across paragraphs. Learners should be made aware of the principal ways of developing paragraphs like development by detail (from the general statement to particular details or from particular statements to the general statement), development by comparison and contrast, development by process (in cases where one step leads to another), and development by classification and division (especially where enumeration is required). To enable learners to develop this awareness of the different ways in which paragraphs can be developed, they may be provided with samples of paragraphs of various kinds and asked to find out the topic sentences and also how the thoughts and ideas have been developed. In addition, learners must be made aware of the ways in which words between or across sentences cross-refer or link up mainly through the following four basic types of cohesion discussed by Halliday and Hasan in their book *Cohesion in English*: reference cohesion, ellipsis, conjunctive cohesion and lexical

cohesion. It is essential here to understand that learners need to notice how cohesive devices operate in a written text before they can be expected to use them in their own composition. Hence, they may be provided with different kinds of passages drawn from different domains of language use and asked to find out, working in pairs or groups, how the cohesive devices work in them.

Focus on brevity and grammatical and conceptual clarity

Brevity, or economy in word usage, is a virtue with regard to effective written communication, especially in technical writing, where circumlocution and tautology need to be avoided altogether. This helps in making the written text gain precision. Apart from this, it is imperative on the part of teachers to make learners aware of the fact that effective written communication entails an ability on their part to express their views and ideas without ambiguity. Hence clarity in writing is something that they should always aim for. This notion of clarity has two facets: grammatical clarity and conceptual clarity. Teachers should enable learners to understand the importance of both kinds of clarity in no uncertain terms. Grammatical clarity actually is brought about by focusing attention on the right use of punctuation, a feature of writing which is more often than not taken for granted, and also aspects like pronoun reference. Punctuation is, as Crystal says, “much more than a grammatical afterthought” (131). Crystal then goes on to refer to Lynne Truss’s book *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*, making us ponder on the difference in meaning brought about by punctuation in sentences like ‘He eats, shoots, and leaves’ and ‘He eats shoots and leaves’ (133). Conceptual clarity, on the other hand, refers to the use of words with the right kind of connotation, clearly showing the attitude of the language user to the topic under consideration.

Focus on the process of writing

Traditionally, language teachers in the Indian classroom have been obsessed with the end product of a writing endeavour, caring little for taking learners through the processes involved in it. In an earlier article (Syam Choudhury 27-32), the author proposed a five-step ‘writing skills development procedure’ for the Indian English classroom, starting with ‘setting the context’ and ‘focusing on content’ and moving on to ‘a focus on the development

of writing skills', 'crafting', and finally 'drafting'. This emphasis on the process of writing, as Seow points out, provides the learners "with a series of planned learning experiences to help them understand the nature of writing at every point" (316). The whole notion of the process approach to teaching writing hinges on the idea of shifting the point of attention from the teacher to the learner as the latter becomes more autonomous, involved as he or she is in the process of generating ideas through brainstorming, recording them, sequencing them, refining them, reviewing them before coming out with a final draft. The process approach entails a lot of flexibility and recursiveness with the possibility of reviewing and revision always there till the final product is produced. In addition, the process approach allows for a lot of peer work as the learners collaborate in their journey through the writing process. However, the process approach suffers from a big drawback in that it not only gives an insufficient attention to the nature of texts that learners produce but also provides an insufficient input as far as linguistic knowledge is concerned.

Focus on different genre or text types

The genre approach to teaching writing takes into consideration different text types and bases itself on the belief that "we don't just write, we write something to achieve some purpose" (Hyland 18). The primary focus of the genre approach is the analysis of the chief characteristic features and conventions of texts belonging to different genres, linking form, function and social context in which the texts are produced in an intricate manner. This linkage enables learners to understand why certain linguistic conventions are associated with certain specific genre types. A wonderful resource for teachers of writing skills is the book titled *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* by Swales and Feak. This book organises writing activities according to text types, and would enable learners to understand how text types determine grammatical choices. For students of technical institutes, text types such as lab reports and business letters are particularly important since they usually require to use these in their professional domain frequently. The advantage of the genre approach is that it enables the learners to develop a rhetorical understanding of different text types besides exposing them to the large genre categories like exposition, argument, narratives and description and also to their sub-types like lab reports and business letters, etc. However, there is a possibility of the genre approach being reduced to mere exploration of how

different text types are textually organised, ignoring the development of skills required to produce an effective written piece. Moreover, there could also arise an accusation with regard to arbitrariness in the choice of models for particular text types.

Conclusion

In the context of the above discussion, it can be said with some assertion that it would be more profitable to use a synthetic, balanced approach to teaching writing in the Indian English classroom in general and the English classroom in technical institutes in particular. This approach should entail a knowledge about grammar, both sentence grammar and textual grammar, a knowledge about the process of writing, involving the several stages before producing the final product, a knowledge of how paragraphs ought to be developed in accordance with the purpose of writing, keeping in mind issues of clarity and brevity in mind, and also a knowledge of different genre types in order that learners are able to appreciate how text types actually determine grammatical choices.

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