

Writing Skills- Discussing the Difficulties: An Attempt

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Writing or to be more specific let us say technical writing demands give and take, a dialogue, a follow-up, input and action. It is also a form of documentation where processes are described, recorded, and analyzed. We know that there is no single procedure of reporting or documentation. It is always need and situation specific. Technical writing has major three factors: purpose, audience and tone. The tone of writing will depend on the purpose and audience. If we write a report solely for the purpose of documentation, then the use of language will be different. If we are writing to someone above us in hierarchy, our tone will be either requesting or recommending. And if we are writing to someone below us in hierarchy, the tone of writing will be directing action or instructing.

In this research paper, an attempt has been made to understand the difficulties faced by the students in using their writing skills. The questionnaire was prepared for the purpose of collecting data for the analysis of writing skills of the select students of select branch of first year doing their BE in Government Engineering College.

Let us not deny the fact that our students of Engineering & Technology face the difficulty when it comes to using the communication skills. We have been able to introduce the syllabus which we believe can enhance the four skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing of our students who are expected to utilize these skills to meet the industry requirements, preparing for

campus placements and for the job. But if we take a broad look at the situation of our learners, we will see that the students who learn what we fondly call communication skills for approximately 3-4 months in a semester while doing their BE, are not in a position to use English for communication. Sharma & Vyas (2015) in their research paper nicely point out the communicating needs of the technical students.

The lack of the use of these skills is observed when the students face problems in facing the interviews during their placements, in making presentations in English, understanding the text written in the technical language, organizing their ideas to communicate their knowledge etc. So it is a matter of fact and great concern for us to help our learners enhance their skills in English.

The major focus in this paper will be on the writing skills problems faced by these students. One of the reasons behind the lack in writing skills among these students is that they are not habituated to writing in English apart from examination point of view, because most of these learners come from a Gujarati vernacular medium background. Moreover, the students also do not have practice of communicating in English in their group. Despite the fact that in Technical Education the medium of instruction is English, the students and faculty members do not communicate in English while following teaching-learning process.

Therefore, to discuss the issue and find out some solutions, a structured questionnaire was prepared. The responses of the students of select branch from BE first semester was taken. The items put on the research tool were mainly designed for students of BE first semester. Each of the items on the research tool was followed by five choices indicating degrees of agreement/disagreement so that the respondents could react to them. Each degree of agreement/disagreement was given a numerical value ranging from one to five. Then the total value of all responses to each statement was calculated and the total values of responses were converted to percentages thereafter. The questionnaire given to the students is as per Annexure I.

100 respondents were randomly selected from three different branches of BE Semester I. They were from branches of Chemical Engineering, Civil Engineering and Computer Engineering. The respondents enthusiastically participated in the process.

Let us try to understand the responses and discuss them. Following is the representation of the responses of the respondents in a tabular manner. The first column of numbers in the table represents the statement. The acronyms are SA= Strongly Agree, A=Agree, NAD= Neither agree nor disagree, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly Disagree used in the table. C stands for neither agree nor disagree situation. A to E represents the degree of agreement or disagreement in the order as shown in the questionnaire. The total of A and B is for easy understating of agreement which is a sum total of Strongly Agree and Agree in percentage. The total of D and E is for easy understanding of disagreement which is a sum total of Disagree and Strongly Disagree in percentage.

Figure-1 Tabular Representation of Responses

Statement Number	Response							
	A (SA)	B (A)	C (NAD)	D (D)	E (SD)	Total Respondents	Total of A & B (%)	Total of D & E (%)
1	24	70	0	6	0	100	94	6
2	39	49	2	8	2	100	88	10
3	26	37	7	25	5	100	63	30
4	58	37	3	2	0	100	95	2
5	7	32	21	33	7	100	39	40
6	14	36	0	28	9	100	63	37
7	30	50	5	13	2	100	80	15
8	14	36	2	40	8	100	50	48
9	51	47	1	1	0	100	98	1
10	0	13	9	50	28	100	13	78

The first item on the tool was aimed at eliciting response from the students on a statement which reads: ‘I feel that my writing in English needs more practice.’ 24%% of the student-respondents strongly agree, whereas 70% of the students agree with the statement. 6% of the respondents

disagree. Hence 94% of the respondents agree that they need more practice in their writing skills in English.

The second statement was framed to test whether learners actually feel difficulty in using the English words in writing and have difficulty in explaining what they want to explain. We felt that such a statement was necessary because we wished to find out whether this could be one of the reasons behind their lack of writing skills. The data reveals that whereas 39% of respondents strongly agree, 49% of them show simple agreement with the same. In other words, there is agreement among 88% of the respondents that they face problems while using words and explaining in English.

We framed the third statement as a natural corollary of the second one. The third statement, therefore, was that “In school days, I have learnt mainly writing in English related to exam purpose.” Our data shows that most of the respondents agree that this is so. 63% of the respondents show their sense of agreement to this and 30% of the respondents show their disagreement. This shows that except some students who belong to the 30% group, most of the respondents are from vernacular medium and therefore they give importance to writing in English only for examination purpose. This also means that if learners do not comprehend English and yet manage to pass the examinations conducted from time to time, then it is obvious that a lot of rote learning might be taking place. This is a real pity.

Our next statement was: ‘As a technical student, I feel the duration of the course like communication skills should be more than one semester in BE.’ Our inquiry in this context led us to a confirmation of what we had believed to be true. The data reveals that 95% of our respondents agree that the duration of the course for learning communication skills is not enough. This is a finding that raises an alarm about the state of affairs in technical education. No wonder, then, our educational institutions are seen as churning out graduates who are simply unemployable!

Our learners, we believe, are not given any challenging language tasks to perform wherein they might be required to use their mental abilities and language competence to the maximum. Some

of us also need to take the blame for our inability to increase the element of challenge in designing tasks. This robs our learners of the incentive to learn. In the absence of motivation of the kind that institutions and teachers need to provide, our learners appear to getting in the habit of adopting short cuts in academic work also. Since our learners do not have adequate linguistic competence to back their effort, they fail when they have to use communicative functions to interact with others.

In the fifth statement, respondents were required to say whether they feel that their writing in English has deteriorated due to the use of social media like facebook, whatsapp etc. To our surprise, the number of those who strongly agreed or simply agreed and disagreed and strongly disagreed was to the extent of almost 40 % each. It should also be noted here that 21% of our respondents neither agree nor disagree with the statement. This leads us to conclude that half of our respondents believe that social media has helped them in enriching their writing skills in English.

Our sixth statement was: 'I feel difficulty to understand the written material either from some book or newspapers or magazines etc. 63% respondents agreed in varying degrees that this was so. This observation leads us to say that a learner needs a sound grounding in reading skills and decoding the printed content either from a book, magazine or from online sources.

Our seventh statement 'I get a lot of ideas but when I start putting them on paper, I feel shortage of words.' Our assumption was that the students have shortage of words while putting things in English on paper due to low vocabulary. 80% respondents agreed that they feel the difficulty. It appears that a majority of the students do not have enough exposure to English language skills, and this is also due to problems with regard to their mastery of four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Our eighth statement: 'I don't have the habit of note taking and note making.' was based on a general belief that the note taking and note making habits are very poor in students. 50% the respondents agreed to varying degree that this was indeed the case. That seems to explain the general perception.

‘I want to learn topics like Technical Report Writing, Business Letter, E-mail etiquettes, Technical Descriptions etc.’, reads our ninth statement. The students’ agreement which varied in degrees was to the extent of 98%. That takes a stand to say that our learners need more practice in terms of learning such topics.

Our tenth statement read: ‘For me, writing is not of that much importance because I can manage it as per my requirements.’ 78% respondents showed disagreement. What this seems to suggest is that our learners need more input for doing better writing in English for their career.

Hence we come to certain conclusions at the end, which are as follows.

1. The duration of the course for the subject Communication Skills is not enough for the learners to practice and learn the communication skills. It demands that they learn the subject at least for two semesters so that they can improve in the real sense.
2. Students alone cannot be blamed for their inadequacy in utilizing their communication skills because the syllabus taught to them needs a thorough modification along with changes in the examination pattern.
3. Writing skills should not be taken loosely by the learners as they play an important role in their career.
4. Technology should be a tool for enhancing the learners’ communicative competence like audio-visual techniques, teaching through CALL and Language Laboratories.
5. The textbooks prescribed by the university should be of a standard that can make the learners learn and not apply shortcuts and pass in the examination without actually learning the skills.

No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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Appendix-1

For each of the statements below, please indicate the extent of your agreement or disagreement by placing a tick in the appropriate column.

1	I feel that my writing in English needs more practice.					
2	I feel confused while using words in writing and I find difficulty in explaining what I want to explain.					
3	In school days, I have learnt mainly writing in English related to exam purpose.					
4	As a technical student, I feel the duration of the course like communication skills should be more than one semester in BE.					
5	I feel that my writing in English has deteriorated due to the use of social media like facebook, whatsapp etc.					
6	I feel difficulty to understand the written material either from some book or newspapers or magazines etc.					
7	I get a lot of ideas but when I start putting them on paper, I feel shortage of words.					
8	I don't have the habit of note taking and note making.					
9	I want to learn topics like Technical Report Writing, Business Letter, E-mail etiquettes, Technical Descriptions etc.					
10	For me, writing is not of that much importance because I can manage it as per my requirements.					

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