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Experiencing Academic Writing in an Indian Scholarly Context

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Abstract

Writing for academic purpose demands direct, simple, brief, vigorous and lucid style which is not an easy task that can be targeted by everyone. And yet every academician does require vigorous practice to acquire the required skill to attain high rate of readability. That writing power is a boon, if acquired. However academic communication is not the cup of many academicians. The non-native English speakers are not well versed with the medium of academic writing at all and it is also neither attractive nor interesting. The present paper “**Experiencing Academic Writing in an Indian Scholarly Context**” has been trying to locate why non native English speaking countries like India perform low academic writing activity in spite of their long years of academic study in the classrooms at primary, upper primary, college or university levels?

Key words: Locate; non native English speaking countries; academic writing activity, academic communication.

Introduction

I was asked to be a resource person by a senior professor of Computer Science, Prof K. Subrahmanyam, the coordinator of a National Workshop on Research Methodology from Dept of Computers of KL University at Vaddeswaram of Guntur district, INDIA held during 15 – 18th May of 2013. There were more than 70 participants from all over India. They were highly enthusiastic, vibrant and passionate to gain knowledge of the right inputs facilitating them to do research at PhD level very meaningfully. The programme is designed to equip the academic staff of engineering colleges in India with appropriate research skills. The very core points of Research Methodology were handled at inaugural session and also covered as part of key note address.

When I was asked to deliver the theme ‘ACADEMIC WRITING’, I agreed immediately, came back, sat in my chair and started surprisingly ‘Reading books on Academic writing’. Then I realized instantaneously that reading is an integral part of writing. I felt like sharing this tip with the participants and hence I opened my introductory remarks emphasizing on the need to read in general and specific. The general reading includes the journals, news papers, books and blogs where as the specific reading is related to the books on academic Writing. I developed a ppt “English for Academic Purposes (EAP): Write it Rightly” and started my sharing of information in an interactive way. There were various discussions on each slide and led to a lively environment. Each participant felt a setback initially but tried to come out of it and started doing the working sheets. Three worksheets were given in all and they were asked to respond. Majority tried but performed very low while some of them miserably failed and a few didn’t try even. The session made them to realize the pitfalls and the findings would help them a lot.

My focus, however, in the present paper has been why does such a situation emerge in non native English speaking countries in spite of their long years of academic study in the classrooms at primary, upper primary, college or university levels?

Review of Literature

In academia, writing is done in quite a few sets of forms and genres. The varieties of critical approaches that can be applied shall vary when one writes about a subject. However as

Harwood and Hadley (2004) and Hyland (2004) have pointed out the amount of variation that exists between different disciplines may mean that we cannot refer to a single academic literacy. The notion of critical pragmatism as an approach was given by them.

Significance/Need of the Study

Teaching English at any of the above mentioned levels does not pay attention to the four core skills of English language – LSRW, but the entire attention of the teacher and the students is examination. Writing is equated to giving examination. Taking down notes is substituted with study material and there is no practice of writing at all in the classroom of English. Spelling, grammar and formatting techniques were not at all imparted. Sentence flow in order to connect the ideas was not practised. The stock of vocabulary was not enriched. As a result of which, every Indian student felt the writing task very dull and bore. The ideas were not shaped carefully and consciously by the students. There was no effort in shaping the ideas, in trimming the ideas and in giving away finally into a written document. The whole exercise of writing is gone to the winds in no time resulting with a new problem – the problem of writing casually.

Academic writing style demands discipline specific and a clear and concise writing style. Word choice is the key to develop a write up on a particular topic of a discipline but no serious attempt is made either by the teaching community or by the learners to bring these inputs under discussion. It is not easy to use appropriate words until and unless a rigorous practice of using the words is repeatedly done. Either a teacher or a student in a group or in a class experiment with the art of writing, the entire class would become masters of such usage. The expertise of avoiding unclear words requires repeated acid tests so that the whole vagueness simply would vanish in each write up that they would write. The knack of not using the absolute words go under the surface of the writing style, only when they deliberately whirl in the ocean of language and trying for oasis – like words to be understood by the people at other end. The precise meaning of the words – ‘between & among’; ‘affect & effect’ - has to be realized by every user. Clarity has to be attained whenever some topic is discussed by removing the vague words and expressions, by not using the negative words and also by not repeating the information. Websites like ‘www.uefap.com’ may well train them and hence some sessions should be allotted for such activities.

Objectives and Hypotheses

Step-By-Step Instruction by the teacher in the classroom environment takes students through the complete academic writing process starting at the sentence level and ending with the researched essay. Effective Academic Writing should instill student confidence and provide the tools necessary for successful academic writing. More content-area related assignments with more academic vocabulary and readings should prepare students for the challenges of the academic classroom. Each topic chosen for practice should introduce an academic content theme and writing task and guide students through the Writing Process. Every level should provide students with the support and instruction they need for writing success. To walk into the challenges toward becoming excellent writers, students are to express their own thoughtful and critical opinions about the readings in a course, or classroom experiences.

My focus, however, in the present paper has been to gauge the situation emerged in non native English speaking countries when its coming to writing for a special purpose in spite of their long years of academic study in the classrooms at primary, upper primary, college or university levels?

Research Methodology

In my session, I gave the participants a writing task and analysed the scenario. The purpose of the study was to discover the writing processes of Indian academic writing. Selection of participants was limited to bilingual Indians in the workshop, and also the group most "at risk" (Lippitt, 1986, 1987). A range of writing abilities was included to determine if there were any differences between the writing processes of bright versus dull. A case study approach was used. All selected participants volunteered. Prior to the actual writing each participant was told he or she would be asked to write a short essay on a topic of his or her choice. At the time of observation, each was given 30 minutes to complete a 180 word essay. No particular instructions regarding prewriting or revision were given. I observed each participant separately, for the most part acting simply as an observer and kept a running commentary of observable behavior such as rereading, pausing, and scratching out. Completed assignments were scored for usage (Brodkey & Young, 1981). The least skilled student in the study had only very poor exposure to writing activity. She wrote 208 words in 25 minutes, writing in the reflexive mode on the topic of her

daily life. She reread only two times; all changes made were in punctuation and spelling. There was no evidence of prewriting. Some wrote 260 words in 30 minutes, writing in the extensive mode, analyzing her experiences in schools. Making notes prior to writing, she spent 3 minutes on prewriting. She reread 3 times with all changes in punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary. Like Zamel's (1983) unskilled writer, she paused so often that she interrupted her own composing process and her piece suffered accordingly. Her usage score was 5.8. Some in the group wrote 294 words in 30 minutes indicating that she had been thinking about her topic in advance. Writing in the extensive mode about single-parenthood, she spent 1 minute on prewriting. She reread 8 times with all her attention during revision given strictly to punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary. Some wrote about 387 words in 33 minutes about the impact of films on students. Before he began to write, he remarked that he hadn't really thought of anything to write. There was no evidence of any prewriting. Writing in the extensive mode, he reread 9 times; all revisions consisted entirely of punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary. Like one of the writers in the unskilled group, all his revision did him little good. One participant wrote in the reflexive mode on the topic, "Something that has been missing in my routine." She wrote 288 words in 20 minutes, spending 2 minutes on prewriting. She reread five times while writing and once when she was finished for "proofing." When questioned as to whether she usually wrote in this same manner, she stated that she wrote even long papers straight through, rarely making any major changes in her final version, only checking for errors. "I struggle to predict it before I commence to put in writing." Another participant stated prior to writing that she had a topic she wanted to write about. Writing 354 words in 30 minutes, she reread eight times. While composing, she volunteered that she generally uses a word processor and generally makes changes as she composes. Inexperienced participants write using a linear process (Perl, 1979, 1980; Pianko, 1979; Sommers, 1980; Zamel, 1983). There was no major reformulation of ideas by any, and the most were concerned only with correct punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary. Additionally, they showed little or no evidence of any prior planning (Taylor, 1984), and their writing merely served to transform thought into writing. Additionally, some were able to produce relatively polished pieces in a short period of time due to the fact that both had thought through their topic prior to writing (Taylor, 1984). There was no evidence of either reordering or addition among any of them. (Sommers, 1980) Only a few seemed to have tapped their felt sense and used their retrospective structuring (Perl, 1980) to shape their writing. Furthermore, the focus on errors of

appearance rather than discovery of meaning indicates transcription rather than composing. (Stallard, 1976) Teaching Indian students in a linear writing process inhibits their search for meaning in their own writing. Whatever approach writing instructors take with Indians, that approach must assist students in discovering what they mean first through the reshaping of language by thought. Therefore, basic courses at the college level need to address analysis skills and conceptualization in writing as well as traditional writing skills. Indians must be allowed to evolve their own solutions through repeated exploration of the same problem.

Results and Discussion

When writing a paper its format, style, body, and bibliography must follow academic guidelines and these will be reflected in the quality of the paper. Two common writing guidelines are called American Psychological Association (APA) or Modern Languages Association (MLA). Any paper is written in any one of the two methods. Critical Writing is usually more objective, and uses discernment, analysis, synthesis, evaluation and reconstruction of thinking in order to form a judgment that reconciles scientific evidence with common sense. Reflective Writing is usually subjective and requires active exploration, clarifying and a deep consideration of what a student is engaged and learning about in a class. According to the purpose, one may try expressive, persuasive, informative or referential, and literary writing. Of these four kinds of writing, referential writing is by far the most common in the academic world because it is based on facts, analysis, and argument. When lab reports, case studies, book reviews, essays etc., are written, the style of writing may be referential; When the world outside is referred the collected references on subject shall be analyzed and presented. The purpose of the analysis will be either to inform or to argue a case, though often a combination of the two. There is an element of persuasion in all effective argument, but in academic argument, persuasion is not the main purpose; giving detailed, logical support for an idea is. The basic components of any paper may include - Introduction (what and why); The Focus or purpose (outline the flow of ideas); Background or history (background information); Body of the paper (Presenting analysis); Conclusion (results of reviewing the literature / research / data); References or bibliography (sources). A ‘good writing space’ has to be created by blocking time off for writing. Inspirational and motivational words are to be written in an uninterrupted space. It is always good to be delinked by turning off the internet and taking phone calls to avoid any interruption.

Being a good writer is like becoming a good artist and so it is good to start with a blank page and write in a way so that words would dance off the page. Is it not effective to raise to the expectations and write creatively so the reader sees what you are trying to paint? Writing is really tough. Practice and patience are the only two aids. It is often quoted to be a single and agonizing experience. It is like creating a gorgeous painting or giving birth. It takes self-care, nurturing, preparation, vision, attention to detail, hard work and determination. Though it is time taking, one has to try to the core to play with words in order to shape the idea in the brightest way. All of these things make the writing process worthwhile.

Conclusion

Writing in English and for academic purposes is challenging. Indian research scholars may be dealing with English as a second language, confidence and skill, and/or access to resources. Also, they also deal with Eurocentric knowledge systems, academic marginalization, and caste, creed and gender issues. In spite of the barriers which are quite real, is it not possible to unlearn and relearn! Academic Writing for research scholars is only recently being validated but not extensively. The power differential is still very much there. Historically, this has always been placed in a binary linear, colonial, and inherently conflicting relationship. All the challenges of writing can be and have been approached so that one's holistic worldview remains the central voice in the work.

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