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English Writing Skills of Technical Diploma Students in Kerala: An Analysis

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Abstract

The present research delves into the English writing skills of students pursuing technical diplomas in Kerala, India. Taking into consideration the need for improving English language skills in Kerala, it is made part of the language learning and educational system in Kerala. In technical institutions also, English is the medium of instruction. English language skills of learners are important and for most learners this is their last opportunity to acquire language in a classroom background. As English has become an indispensable lingua franca in the global technical and scientific community, the capability to articulate complex technical concepts in written English is paramount. The study employs a descriptive-analytical research design, assessing the students' proficiency in various dimensions such as grammar, syntax, coherence, and technical lexicon. Data was gathered from a representative sample of students through the administration of a series of structured writing tasks and questionnaires. The responses were subsequently evaluated using a rubric formulated on established linguistic standards. Moreover, faculty members were interviewed to glean insights into the pedagogical approaches employed in fostering writing skills. The findings reveal that while students exhibited an understanding of technical concepts, many faced challenges in effectively communicating these in written English. Deficiencies in grammatical accuracy, vocabulary usage, and the ability to structure arguments logically were prominent. The study proposes the integration of context-specific English writing modules within the curriculum and advocates for the development of faculty training programs to address these lacunae and bolster the communication acumen of technical diploma students. It is an attempt to identify specific issues related to writing skills of technical diploma students. This research article presents a study based on the writing skills of learners in Polytechnic colleges in Kerala.



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Introduction

Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) happens primarily in educational institutions. Acquisition of English language skills in schools and colleges aims at an integrated development of language skills. This will come to pass only with adequate exposure to the English production and receptive skills. The effort to help learners acquire adequate level of proficiency in English in educational institutions is primarily the duty of English language teachers. English is also accepted as the medium of instruction in academics in many parts of India. In Polytechnics, English has become integral as it helps learners in their workplaces as the majority of learners go for a job after their diploma studies. Learners who go for higher learning also find an adequate level of English language skills beneficial. In contrast to the popular belief that writing skills of learners are above average level, a specific study related to this will reveal the aspects related to vocabulary of subject content, specific language structures, punctuation, spelling and communicating the intended meaning.

Kerala Context of TESL in Technical Institutions

In technical institutions like technical high schools, English is taught as a subject like General Science and Social Science. Learning of other languages like mother tongue and Hindi are also taught in the same manner. This is because of the lack of language use. Ken Hyland has defined skills as “Teaching the generic set of skills and strategies such as ‘referencing’, ‘note taking’ and ‘essay writing’ that can be taught then applied in a particular learning situation” (223). This has to be the aim in using English in subject content learning.

Skill Development

Development of different skills is the aim of TESL, but in actual conditions this is not seen. The learners cannot even write or speak in English. (ASER Study). There is much scope for improving their writing skills in the present system, but it is also seen defective as identified from different studies in this area.

Methodology of the Study

The study involved teaching of the first module of semester 2 students of diploma in Mechanical Engineering in three colleges in two districts in South Kerala. Twelve learners from each institution were included in this study. An achievement test was conducted after that and evaluation of the answers were done by the content teacher with the help of the language teacher. Marks were awarded out of ten for vocabulary, language structures and out



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of five for punctuation and spelling. The specific errors in each of these were identified to find the areas that need development in writing. An opinionnaire was also given to teachers and learners to identify the causes for inadequate writing skills. Suggestions for improvement were also elicited from the sample population. The results are analysed qualitatively.

Issues in Academic Language Use

A lecture, followed by a test in writing and speaking was conducted to specifically identify the issues faced by the learners in academic language acquisition and use. The results of this test are given below.

Writing

Writing test for twenty minutes revealed several aspects about academic vocabulary, language structures, basic language elements, spelling and punctuation marks. Four questions were asked to elicit paragraph answers which were the basis of evaluation.

Vocabulary Issues

There were two issues related to academic vocabulary: using the wrong word in a particular context and using a grammatically wrong word in a context. The first one is a semantic issue. This can also be not using any word in a context. The second one is more a grammatical issue, where the verb form of a word is used where a noun form is needed. It was found that an effort was taken by the learners to use vocabulary needed for a particular context. Examples of errors: characterised by strength, opaque to light; ferric instead of ferrous; amorphance instead of amorphous; algomic for amorphous; mechanic properties instead of mechanical properties; `made composing instead of compounding; reinfixed cement instead of reinforced; machable and malthu instead of machinability; dutalak for durability; one chemical instead of metal; brought iron instead of wrought; deberied results, deside properties, deized and decide instead of desired; maid instead of made; desire results instead of desired; break disc instead of brake; compositence and commbosits instead of composites; character by instead of characterised by; relvation instead of relation etc. The marks given to learners for the language proficiency in terms vocabulary part are given below.

Marks for Vocabulary [Out of 10] (Table No. 1)

College 1	7	6.5	6	6	6.5	6	6	5	5.5	6	5	6
College 2	5	6.5	4.5	6.5	7.5	6	6	7	6	5.5	8	6.5
College 3	5	4	4	4.5	4	7.5	8	7	5.5	4	3	5

Issues in Language Structures

The language structures include basic structures needed for writing and specific structures needed for the academic transaction. This is an area in which learners have made a number of errors. This includes errors in subject-verb agreement, wrong tense forms, errors in



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prepositions structures of either...or, use of articles, errors in the use of word forms in different parts of speech, wrong word combinations, omissions of essential words unknowingly and absence of sentence linkers.

The errors include: metals are opaque, lustre; is a metal that poses; composed (words missing) two features; there instead of their; metal are; alloys is; either of oxides, nitrides and carbides; two or more three element; all metals is; made () two metals; which are (); This are; It () form by; by artificially by; which are good conductor; which are good conductor; either oxides, carbides, silicates; other non metallic (); two or more metal; made either or oxide; like to strength; posses to metallic; are compound; it characterised by; they are amorphous, softly; except minority of thermo plastics; composter of two or more; has a base components; one type of elements; ceramic are insulator of current; they are electropositive () which; is a elements; and like to get applying; a mechanical laws; made either (); alloys is they; have metallic ().

It was found that these errors sometimes distort the meaning or give a vague idea about the content transacted. The ideas which the learners have in their mind is not fully transferred in writing due to inadequate and wrong language structures. This problem was noticed in all the answer papers in varying degrees. The percentage of errors as per language structures can be given as a table

Percentage of Errors in Language [Writing] (Table No. 2)

Language structures	No. of errors	Language structures	No. of errors
subject-verb agreement	46	errors in the use of word forms in different parts of speech	16
wrong tense forms	21	wrong word combinations	14
errors in prepositions	18	, omissions of essential words unknowingly	12
structures of either...or,	8	sentence linkers.	10
use of articles,	15		

The marks awarded to language structures are given below

Marks for Language Structures [out of 10] (Table No. 3)

College 1	7	7	5	7	7	5	5	7	5	5	5	3
College 2	4	6	4	5	7	5	5	5	7	7	8	8
College 3	4	3	2	2	2	6	8	8	5	4	3	5

Spelling Mistakes



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Spelling mistakes are a major issue seen in all the answer papers. The learners who have Malayalam, a phonetic language as their mother tongue can naturally make such errors, but as L2 users of English, in their academic and professional life it is an issue which can hinder their growth.

Some examples for such errors include: brak pad, crystalline, cristaline, crystalin, crystalline, lavilability, uster, apperence, abtain, meterials, metallic, partualli, availability, ferres, ferras, deized, decide/deside/dezird/deberied/deseird/deseried (desired), zeramic, seramic, composits, possas, character by, carbidos, glas, combosits, compositence, condain, minarals, allements, condectivity, pocess, wrot iron, alloyes, characterised, break disc, maid, ductity, combing, componds, phosed (forced), coroshion, law conductivity, britl, artificaly, composits, lether, engineering, ferrous, soldr, meterils, egsampls, compaired, reinforced, amont, nitragon, brittle, ferric, brazz, axept, amorphance, partily, charatries, ferarous, feros, lather, comprassion, natature,algomic (amorphous) and propertys

The marks awarded for spelling are given below.

Marks for Spelling [Out of 5] (Table No. 4)

College 1	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1
College 2	1	1	1	1	3	2	2	2	1	1	3	2
College 3	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1

Punctuation Issues and Capital Letters

The majority of the learners are aware of using stops (.) and about sixty percent uses commas. Colons, semi colons, inverted commas, hyphens and dashes are not used by the learners except by a few. Capital letters are used at the beginning of sentences by more than ninety percent learners, but some have capital letters intermittently without any without any rule.

Marks awarded to punctuation marks and capital letters are given below.

Marks for punctuation marks and capital letters [out of 5] (Table No. 5)

College 1	4	4	2	3	2	1	3	1	1	1	2	1
College 2	2	2	3	3	4	4	3	2	2	1	3	3
College 3	1	1	1	1	1	3	4	4	2	1	1	2

Analysis of Results

1) In writing, the average marks (out of 10) for the vocabulary is 5.75. This shows that only about fifty percentage of transaction is successful in vocabulary. The average score of

(81)

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language structures is 5.3. The total number of errors in writing in 36 answer scripts are 160 which is an average of 4.4 errors per paper. The errors related to subject- verb agreement is 46. That accounts to 29 % of errors. The remaining errors are those related to tense (21 which is 13 %) prepositions (18 which is 11%), word forms related to different parts of speech (16 which is 10 %) articles (15 which is 9%), word combinations (14), word omissions (12), sentence linkers (10), other related structures (8). The average marks related to spelling is 1.6 (out of 5) and the average marks related to punctuation is 2.2 (out of 5). This shows that the learners are facing a serious issue in relation to accurate writing.

2) The causes for poor academic language acquisition as given by the learners and the teachers include stress and strain, poor linguistic knowledge, mother tongue interference, financial issues, different mediums of instruction and lack of understanding about the importance of English. These are personal views about the causes which is based on personal experiences and observation. These issues, excluding the social and financial issues point to the fact that there is a serious flaw in the learning/ acquiring English in the educational system which also creates stress and strain on the part of the learners. There are also misconceptions about the importance of English in the society which is giving over importance or giving less importance. Both these can create issues in learning.

3) The ideas elicited on the solutions for solving academic language issues from the learners and teachers include the following: A change in the methods of learning English from the primary level of schooling is required; English should be acquired rather than taught about English; Classroom pedagogy should suit such a kind of learning; Learning should be student-centred and individual attention should be given to learners. In writing an effort to constantly revise “to ensure that the product is improved, based on their knowledge of the subject and their knowledge of the language” (Flowerdew and Peacock 187). The speaking/ listening skills should also be tested. In content learning special attention should be given to the academic language and it should be seen that the language of the academic content reaches the learners.

Conclusion

The results of written responses of the learners were analysed and it was found that the learners of diploma lack the basic academic writing skills A qualitative analysis of the written samples showed that only fifty percentage of academic language is transacted and used in the classrooms which shows that learning is seriously defective. There should be an effort “to develop academic language proficiency at the paragraph and sentence level” (Freeman & Freeman 119). Proper exposure to language along with opportunity to use English should be given as suggested by learners and teachers. The need for individual



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attention was also mentioned by the learners with respect to language teaching. This also has to be sorted out considering the overcrowded classrooms in local contexts.

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