



Why are our Students Unable to Write in English

Dr.S.Hemalatha

Asst. Professor

Prasaranga

Dravidian University

Kuppam – 517 426

Andhra Pradesh

ABSTRACT

Technical advancement has given a backseat to the writing activity, but we cannot underestimate the importance of writing skills. Writing is the most difficult of the language skills. It is a skill in which we produce a sequence of sentences arranged in a particular order. It is a production skill involving, manipulating, structuring, and communicating. Learning to write in English is a mode of communication. In the present world scenario, whether you like it or dislike it, learning English has become mandatory to perform better and to march ahead in this competitive world. A teacher has to prepare the learner to develop their writing skill in real-life settings. But many times, this learning becomes examination-oriented. Learning to write is not just a natural extension of learning to speak a language. A close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing a valuable part of any language course. Writing is one of the most demanding skills, which has to be deliberately cultivated.

English is the lingua franca which is connecting different people from different countries in our day-to-day life. In this age of computers, we are constantly bombarded by information. English is playing a vital role in all parts of the world. Its necessity is being felt by all, hence, there is a massive growth in the number of learning English. As the internet expanding explosively, English is instrumental in keeping us on par with it. English has affected all angles of human society.

English serves as a linguistic tool for administration purposes in the country. English helps the people, who speak different languages to become united. It is also a linguistic bridge between the major countries in the world. Therefore, English language learning has become necessary for all learners. With the growing technology, proficiency in English has become an essential criterion for acquiring a good job. Many people who cannot comprehend and interpret English are unemployed even if they are well educated.

Learners of the lower strata of society are forced to join the government schools because private schools are being too expensive to afford. In the regional medium schools, English as a second language is introduced only after the fifth class. These learners do not have a motivating and supporting environment to learn English. They lack proper exposure to the English language. For these learners, the only opportunity to learn English is in the classroom atmosphere. Various other factors, such as poor economic background, illiterate parents, etc. contribute to the learners' poor proficiency. With the various policies of the government, the situation seems to be improving, but still, a lot has to be done to facilitate the English learning environment.

Language is a means of communication. It is the medium of the instrument through which thoughts, ideas, and feelings are transmitted from one mind to another. Language plays an important role in human life. There are many languages in the world, among the languages English is the most common language. The people of different parts of the world are quite familiar with the English language.

Every language has three constituents. They are sound, structure, and vocabulary. The chief problem in learning a foreign language is to master its sound system other distinctive features. The second problem is to grasp the structure of the language, the arrangement of words into sentences. The third problem is to learn the vocabulary and to operate them in different situations. The fundamentals of the language the sound system and the structures within a limited vocabulary should be mastered through speech. Without mastering a language orally, the process of reading is reduced only to translation. The learners can learn a language, grammatical patterns, essential vocabulary through the basic skills.

There are four basic language skills, which every learner must master. They are a) Listening, b) Speaking, c) Reading and d) Writing. Listening and reading are receptive skills whereas speaking and writing are productive skills. Speech is an essential aspect of language learning. Reading and writing are secondary.

Listening is a prerequisite to further communication. Listening involves processing the data. Listening is not an isolated activity. It is always followed by some other activity like speaking, reading, and writing. When we listen to others we are 'receiving' language, its sounds that have certain agreed meanings.

When we speak, we are supposed to have mastery of vocabulary. It means that we are familiar with the sentence patterns and their meanings and can use them in meaningful contexts. We would also be familiar with the varieties of sentences, which could be produced from simple patterns. Experience and training are required for mastery of sentence structure.

Reading means understanding the meaning of printed words i.e. written symbols. Reading is an active process, which consists of recognition and comprehension skills. Flowers (1981), in an interesting comment on the skills of reading and writing, describes 'reading' as the transferring of 'symbol' into thought and 'writing' as the transferring of 'thought into symbol'.

Writing is the communication of ideas to someone through the written media. Writing is an expression of clear thinking. Speaking is spontaneous in most cases, whereas writing requires correctness of grammar use, appropriateness of expression, and comprehension on the reader's part.

There is a close relationship between reading and writing. Learners with reading habits will have many opportunities to meet the new words in different situations. As a result, we can enhance our vocabulary.

Paradigms of Writing:

Vivienne Maddock (1995) provides four basic principles for effectively developing the language skill of writing, viz., understanding, contextualization, speaking, reading, and writing. Firstly, one has to ensure that one uses the most effective teaching methods so that the students retain what they learn. Moreover, it is only when the spoken element has been mastered a student can write well. Secondly, a context for the subject matter must be provided, which is real and practical and to which the students can easily relate to form their own experience. Thirdly, in addition to teaching correct grammar structures, it is equally important to teach the appropriate natural speech of every day, because any day-to-day communication will invariably use the common structures and usage of spoken English. Fourthly, one needs to help students to read and write the living language, but this should be done only when the students are competent and confident enough to express themselves in the spoken form of the language.

Today's writing specialists consider writing to be a thinking process. In other words, when we are at the point of actually putting words on the paper when our brain is actively engaged with the details of our material during the utility stage, we are not simply transcribing our thoughts, we are also shaping and reshaping them, rethinking, revising, analysing. To some extent, we don't know what we think until we try to write it. Peter Elbow (1973) presents the right image for this phenomenon: Meaning is not what you start with but what you end up with control, coherence, and knowing our mind are not what you start with but what you end up with. Elbow has another good image for the writing process: "producing writing. is not so much like filling a basin, but getting water to flow through till it finally runs clear".

Writing sub-skills:

Widdowson (1978) describes writings as the use of the visual medium to manifest the graphological and grammatical systems of the language. Writing is perhaps one of the most demanding skills. It has to be deliberately cultivated. Unlike listening and speaking, it is not natural to humans – it is a skill that has been developed in a civilized society to pass on knowledge or messages beyond the constraints.

The skill of writing includes several sub-skills, the sub-skills of writing are:

1. Mechanics - handwriting, spelling, punctuation, etc.
2. Word choice - vocabulary, idiom, tone
3. Organization unity - paragraphs, topic and support, cohesion and unity
4. Syntax - sentence structure, sentence boundaries, stylistic, etc.
5. Grammar - rules for verbs, agreement, articles, pronouns, etc.
6. Content - relevance, clarity, originality, logic, etc.
7. The writing process revision etc. – getting ideas, getting started, writing drafts, revision, etc.
8. Purpose - the reason for writing, justification

L.S.Vygotsky (1978) states that writing is a self-regulatory activity, which has to do primarily with knowing and secondarily with communicating. From this, it can be understood that teaching writing should be done with a lot of guidance, support, and care, to help learners to become independent or self-regulated. Therefore, the teacher has to play a crucial role to help learners to write on their own. However, thinking, gathering ideas, organizing, drafting, etc, play an important role so they have to be inculcated primarily in our learning process and helping them to emerge as independent writers. Various reasons like lack of practice in writing, limited exposure to writing activities, rote learning, outdated pedagogical practices contribute to the poor writing skills of the learners.

Another important aspect is that most of the activities in our classrooms tend to be unrealistic and make the students perform unnatural roles. Therefore Widdowson (1978) emphasizes the need for the authenticity of the writing tasks, which should be interesting, realistic, and relevant to real-life situations. Only when language learning is close to real-life situations, learning can be motivated and involved in the process of language learning.

The present teaching practices promote only rote learning to pass in the examinations, without giving any importance to the development of language skills in general and writing in particular. Despite the changing needs, which require skills to communicate effectively in English instead of scoring marks, the present pedagogy remains the same. It is high time we realize the need of the hour and make the learners use English effectively to serve in various fields.

How to Enhance Vocabulary:

Today the plight of the rural students in learning English is not encouraging. Students struggle with the learning of language. Language acquisition is a mirage for the students. This deficiency in the language entails the fact that students study only for passing examinations, but not out of interest in the language. This is because only due to their inability to comprehend the language vividly. It is the inevitable responsibility of the teacher to make the students familiar at least with few words like Michel's General Service List, which we use frequently. Building vocabulary is the first step towards mastering the language. Language experts advocate that we can gain vocabulary through watching the news or various programmers on television, by reading newspapers, etc., but the underprivileged rural learners will not be able to do so. There are some simple methods of developing vocabulary. Memorizing the words or synonyms will not enrich one's vocabulary. Only through some valid exercises for the students, the teacher can enable them not only to learn new words but also make them use those new words in suitable situations and constructing sentences on their own. The English language is a diverse language with any number of words.

- Ø One can gather a large number of words by adding prefixes or suffixes to the root words. The teacher can ask the students to write associated words eg. 'generate', 'generation', 'generation', 'generator' etc.,
- Ø Commonly known prefixes which are added to simple root words will enhance one's vocabulary eg: unhappy/unhealthy/unsuccessful/uneducated/unimportant.
- Ø Adding suffixes not only enhances the vocabulary of the students but also helps in understanding various parts of speech. Eg: heartless, useless, merciless, careless, carefulness.
- Ø Numerous words can be generated by using root words or to the verb 'care' various words can be generated like careful; careless, caring, carelessly, etc.
- Ø Learning about homophones and their meanings is also an effective way to enrich the vocabulary of the students. For example. 'Stationary' means without moving and 'stationery' means the materials associated with writing. The Head of the institution is 'principal' and 'principle' is a fundamental truth. The ability to distinguish the difference between these homophones also sharpens the vocabulary of the students.
- Ø In English there are many words with similar and dissimilar meanings. Synonyms are words that convey similar meanings, whereas antonyms convey meanings that are opposite. Eg: sunrise-dawn, sunset dusk, demolish destroy, depart leave destiny fate.
- Ø English is also very rich in antonyms. Some words have many antonyms. Young x old, entrance x exists, strong x weak, correct x wrong, complete x incomplete, natural x unnatural, common x uncommon, ordinary x extraordinary, different x same, giant x dwarf, etc...

Reading newspapers can strengthen the learner's language skills and will help them to write efficiently. Not only newspapers, newspapers but reading any piece of text, will enhance the language skills of an individual. The primary aim of reading a newspaper is to know the news around the world. A newspaper can also be read intensively for learning vocabulary, by selecting any news story that interests him. The learner can understand the usage of new words, idioms, and phrases from the context independently with the help of the dictionary.

Picture illustrated storybooks play a major role in improving the vocabulary of the students. In the Indian context, though there are umpteen picture illustrated storybooks, 'Amarchitrakatha' deserves a unique place among them. It has a plethora of collections like animal fables, folk tales, tales of Akbar and Birbal catering to the divergent interests of the students. Another remarkable feature of 'Amarchitrakatha' is its wide range of vocabulary which has a tangible impact on one's vocabulary.

The environment to which a person is exposed becomes an important factor in improving the communicative skills of the student. If a student belongs to urban surroundings, he picks up English without much strain in his peer group interaction, when it comes to rural background it is very difficult to acquire the skill. While handling students living in the rural locality it is the responsibility of the teacher to create an English-speaking atmosphere in the classroom. Most often these students will be first-generation learners without any parental support. This method will provide a conducive medium for enabling the students to gain communication skills.

Dictation:

Words are basic parts of a language in their written form could be attributed to wrong spellings or lack of concentration in spellings. This will affect the learner's grade and possibly determine his future. Only a few learners possess better proficiency levels, many fail to perform minimum language skills. Even the low proficient learner should reach at least a minimum level of learning in the process of classroom transaction. Every class has learners from different socio-cultural backgrounds, with a wide range of differences in their learning styles. Children commit many spellings mistakes. Dictation is a suitable method to enrich the vocabulary of the learners and it also helps them to develop the habit of concentration.

Impositions, Dictation, writing difficult words on the blackboard, correcting the spellings in their notes or assignments, or writing constructive comments in the margin will improve their spellings. It would be hand-holding support to low-proficient learners. Topics of interest like cars, bikes, games, or film actors will encourage the students to participate actively, endorsing such tasks will improve the situation. Cutouts of pictures from magazines, newspapers, and hand-drawn sketches of story pictures, various characters

from epics, or any other interesting stories will improve their writing skills using these pictures. Dividing the class into small groups and assigning tasks will make the learners involved.

A large number of words are not in the learner's active vocabulary. This improved vocabulary boosts the confidence of the students and loses the fear of learning the English language. These communication skills will enhance their ability in their spoken and written skills. Keeping up one's vocabulary up to date will be one of the most effective means of ensuring quality education and success in mastering the language.

Introduction words with silent letters like wrong, psychology, knock, knowledge, etc. students should be given activities like crosswords, riddles, mnemonics will help them to learn spellings easily. Students' confidence level increases with a good knowledge of spelling. Teaching the students about some basic spelling rules in framing plurals or giving exercises related to words that are often misspelled will improve the condition.

'Gothrabandu' is a program in Kerala, which is meant to reduce the dropouts of tribal students. It is a program launched in Kerala for improving the quality of education of tribal students. These students express themselves quite confidently with their community. But when they join a school, they do not feel at ease with the new culture and language, which is unfamiliar, this sense of alienation leads them to drop out of the school. Under this project educated tribal youth will be appointed in the primary school as mentor teachers to assist the children and make the school tribal-friendly centers. These mentors will interact with the newly enrolled children in their ethnic language to support them. They will assist the children in their studies, evaluate their health status, monitor their attendance, and keep their comprehensive record of each tribal child, to reduce the fear and after primary schooling, they will be in the normal streamline. If this type of project is introduced in all states we can get better results. As many committees suggested there should be some hand holding support up to some extent at the primary level of education and later they can completely switch to the English medium.

Conclusion:

Learner's poor proficiency in writing is mainly due to their lack of confidence and fear. Medium of instruction also plays an important role. Repeated exposure to new words will help the learners in their retention and include their writing skills. In the lower level, the medium of instruction should be in the regional medium but at the higher level, it should be English medium because in the present world scenario, whether you like it or dislike it learning English has become mandatory to perform better and to march ahead in this competitive world.

References:

1. Peter Elbow. (1973). Writing without Teachers. London: Oxford University Press.
2. Widdowson, H.G. (1979). Teaching Language as Communication. London: Oxford University Press.
3. Vivienne Maddock. (1995). "Development of Skills", English Language Teaching at Cross Roads. (Eds.) Gautam Banarjee and Siddhartha Ganguly. Titagarh: Linkman Publications.