

An Assessment of Writing Skills amongst the Mother-Tongue Medium Entry Level Engineering Students of Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

The main focus of this research paper is to study the threshold level knowledge in English language pertaining to the writing skills of the students from the mother tongue medium Schools upon their immediate entry into the tertiary level. The paper discusses the data related to an ongoing research study being conducted in order to identify the level of English possessed by Tamil medium students on their entry into the tertiary level. A total of 20 students were selected overall for the study. The questions chosen were primarily from the 12th standard state board syllabus of Tamil Nadu. The marks set was 50. There was no time limit given to the students. For the purpose of this research article the writing skills of 3 students were taken as samples. The major findings of the study were the student's inability to write English that is expected at the tertiary level and the difference in marks scored by the students in the test conducted with that of their marks in board exams. The main recommendations of the study are suggesting a separate syllabus for these students, the change in the teachers approach in conducting the classes and the materials that needs to be chosen for teaching and having a different evaluating or assessing criterion for these students.

Keywords: *Second Language Acquisition, Mother Tongue Medium, English Language Learners*

1.Introduction

The English Language Skills present in a student coming from the English medium of instruction undoubtedly varies to that of the student from the mother tongue medium of instruction. But the processes through which they acquire these skills are nearly the same. Awopetu [1] states that the mother tongue is the first language that is learnt by the child. Nunan [2] says that children put down their ideas and thoughts down on paper from an early age. As they slowly climb the pedagogic ladder, the purposes of the various skills are clearly stated to them. They begin to realize the reason and importance to develop these skills that will ensure them a bright future. A student hailing from the mother tongue medium of instruction finds this difficult due to the lack of acquaintance in the English language.

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One of the primary problems that English Language Teachers at the tertiary level faces today is the disparity between the marks obtained by the mother tongue medium student's in their school level public exams and the English language skills they demonstrate in the classrooms at the tertiary level. To quote Ms.Sangeetha, working as an ESL teacher at the tertiary level,

“the students coming from the mother tongue medium of instruction have little or no understanding in the basics of English grammar. The marks obtained in their public exams are not a reflection of their performance in the tertiary classroom.”

2.Review of Literature

In order to understand the nature of this problem, the background of the students coming from the mother tongue medium schools should be analysed. Padwad [3] says that the students coming from the mother tongue medium of instruction are basically poor by nature. Their parents are illiterate or have less education and work as farmers or daily wage labourers. Many of them send their wards to schools to just ensure that their child get the midday meals provided by the government.

Freire [4] observes that hunger and poverty severely affects the child's ability and capability to study and learn. Jenson [5] states that poverty can literally affect the psyche or the behavioural patterns in the classroom.

According to Samson, Noronha and Anuradha De [6], the main objective of the mid – day meal scheme initiated by the government of Tamil Nadu was to boost the universalisation of education by increasing the enrolment of the poor and underprivileged sections of the society.

Durairaj [7] remarks that people coming from the depressed classes cannot afford to send their children to private schools or English medium schools due to the high amount of fees. Vijayakumar and Malekar [8] argue that lack of trained teachers at the rural areas is also a major concern.

A majority of these children did not have efficient teachers in English at the school level because their teachers themselves hailed from schools which were of mother tongue medium of instruction. Some of these teachers teach English using mother tongue. To quote Ms.M.Vanmathi, a student coming from the mother tongue medium of instruction, *“My teacher simply read the prose work from the text book prescribed and summarized it in Tamil and gave us the notes”*.

Chaudhary [9] notes that these students have very limited access to English related materials apart from their textbooks. Some of the mother tongue medium schools do not have libraries and even those having one have very limited books pertaining to English. Mr. Naveen Kumar, a student coming from the mother tongue medium of instruction,

“Our school has a library. But there are hardly 10 books pertaining to English. Further, the English Newspaper subscribed to the library goes missing in the morning itself. We do not know who takes away the newspaper”.

These are certain issues that need to be addressed in order to find a proper solution to the problem.

The acquiring of a language spans a number of diverse areas. Emphasis is aimed at providing evidence of whether fundamental linguistic skills are sometimes either innate (nature) as observed by Chomsky [10], acquired (nurture), or a combination of the two attributes.

Krashen [11] delineates the process through which the Second Language Acquisition happens in an individual through five stages. They are

- Pre – Production – This is also known as the silent period or the silent stage. Learners during this stage attain a receptive vocabulary of up to 500 to 600 words. But the learners aren't able to communicate in the language.
- Early – Production – During this stage, the learner does acquire the ability to talk in short phrases using some words. Further, they memorize chunks of language, although they make mistakes using them.
- Speech Emergence – During this period, learner's vocabularies increase to 3000 words and the learners begin to communicate using simple phrases and questions. They often make severe grammatical errors.
- Intermediate Fluency – At this stage, the learners have a vocabulary that has increased to some 6000 words. The learners begin to share their thoughts and opinions and also use complicated sentence structures. The learners make errors but the ratio of making errors drastically decreases when compared to the previous stages.
- Advanced Fluency – This stage is normally attained somewhere between five to ten years of learning the language. Learners at this stage speak somewhere close or on par with the native speakers.

Ellis [12] clearly states that there may be some internal and external factors that invariably play a decisive role in acquiring a second language. One of the primary external factors is the social milieu in which the acquisition takes place. The samples of the language that the learners are exposed to or in other words the input that the learners receive are also considered to be another external factor.

Robinson and Ellis [13] add that the learners possess cognitive mechanisms which facilitate them to extract information about the second language from the input and also have a wide understanding about the world which they can draw on to help them understand the second language input. These are considered as internal factors. The learners also possess certain communication strategies that help them to make effective use of their knowledge in the second language. These factors clearly delineate and describe the process through which a second language is acquired and explains why certain learners seem to be better at it than others.

Students entering the tertiary level from the mother tongue medium of instruction are bound to make errors since their exposure to the English Language is comparatively lesser to that of the students from the English medium of instruction. Rod Ellis [14] explains that there are three good reasons for focusing on errors. They are –

- Errors are an obvious feature of learning and no learning can take place without errors.
- It is extremely useful for the teachers to know what kind of errors their learners make and identify the level of knowledge that the learner has in the language through the errors committed.
- It is also a unique possibility that the errors made by the learners may indirectly help them to understand and learn when they self - correct the errors and help them to progress in the language.

Margo Gottlieb [15] describes how an assessment for the non-native learners of English should be conducted. Her work primarily deals with the assessment amongst the non-native speakers of English (Spanish Medium in particular) at the higher secondary level. She states that English language learners need some kind of a language support that is raised and connected from their prior cultural, linguistic and educational experiences. She adds that instruction, curriculum and assessment should serve as a scaffold or springboard from the previous exposure of the language amongst the students.

It is also important to note that the society or the surroundings of the student determines the student's potency in unlocking the knowledge in language acquisition. Coleman [16] interprets society as all of those broader backgrounds in which are situated the foundations in which language teachings take place.

Students live in societies that have a strong influence on their lives, opinions and beliefs. Kramsch [17] explains that the background of the learner forms an inalienable part of his language learning and further states that the context of culture is present from the first day that the learner begins to learn a language.

3.Objectives of the Study

- To evaluate the mother tongue-medium student's level in the writing skills in English Language upon their immediate entry into the tertiary level.
- To provide possible recommendations that will enable the student's coming from the mother tongue medium of instruction to improve their English language capabilities at the tertiary level.

4.Hypothesis of the Study

The writing skills of the students coming from the mother tongue medium schools in Tamil Nadu are generally poor because of several internal and external factors.

5.The Study Conducted

The first year Bachelor of Engineering students from Civil Engineering and Mining Engineering from the Tamil medium studying in Anna University, College of Engineering Guindy, were taken as samples for the research study. Around 20 students were identified coming from the Tamil Medium of instruction. These students were given the test in writing

skills in the first semester i.e., within 2 weeks after their admission to their courses. There was no time duration given to the students since it will enable them to take up the test without fear or anxiety. The questions were chosen from the 12th standard state board syllabus of Tamil Nadu. The marks set was 50. The questions with regards to the writing skills were on writing a paragraph, dialogue writing, hints development, letter writing (formal and informal) general essay etc.

For the purpose of this research paper the researcher has identified 3 students for analysis.

Student A: The student is pursuing B.E. Civil Engineering at Anna University, Chennai. The student had scored 155 on 200 in English in the 12th std public examination. The student hails from a village called Kondampatti in Dharmapuri District, Tamil Nadu. The student pursued studies in a government school present in the village. The parents are illiterate and do farming on their own land to earn a living. Their annual income is only 36,000/- per annum and the family survives from the benefits given by the government. The student had gone to school only for the sake of having at least one good meal a day through the midday meal scheme provided by the government. The familial surroundings and the direct effect of poverty had a terrible impact on the education. The student during school days was highly motivated to learn the English Language. The student had just two periods of English class a week during the 11th and 12th standards and further had no exposure to English beyond the classroom.

Critical Comment: The student had scored only 10 marks. The student had fulfilled the task of attempting all the questions but had failed to write the answers in accordance with the word limit. A sample transcript of the essay written by the student is given in figure 1 as below-

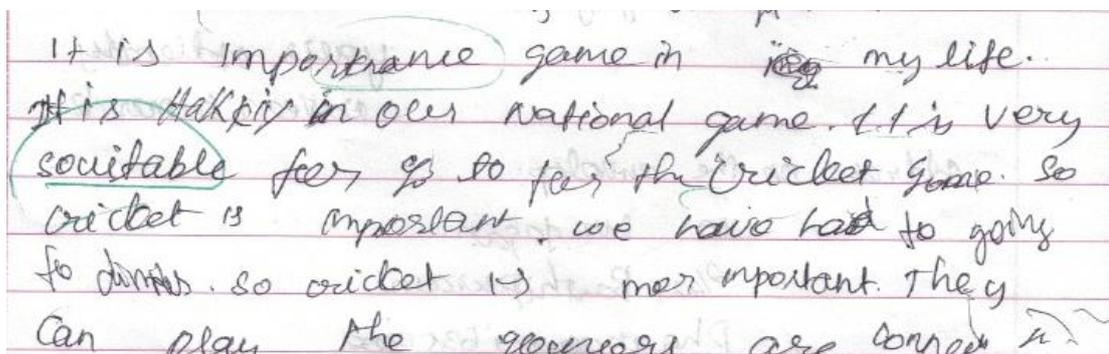


Figure 1. Sample transcript of Student A

The student had chosen the essay “The importance of sports and games” and had written for just 185 words when the maximum word limit was 300 words. There was some content given by the student with regards to the topic but lacked cohesion and coherence. The student made mistakes in grammar, mixed the tenses while writing the essay and further had spelling errors. The student wrote short sentences and abstained from quoting. The student had simply rewritten the sentences given in the question paper for the question relating to paragraph without adding any new sentence. The student had attempted both formal and informal letters. But the content of the letters was very short and were written for just two or three sentences. The student had once again made errors with regards to grammar and vocabulary. Dialogue writing and hints development lacked content, organization and errors in grammar.

Student B: The student is doing B.E. Mining Engineering at Anna University, Chennai. The student had scored 152 on 200 in English in the 12th std public examination. The student hails

from a village called Pillanji in Vellore District, Tamil Nadu. The student's village didn't have a government school. Hence the student had to go to a nearby village that had a government school. The parents are illiterate and work as masons for daily wages to earn a living. Their annual income is only 44,000/- per annum and the family relies entirely on the benefits provided by the government to sustain their living. The student had no English teacher in his 11th std and only towards the mid of 12th std, the school had appointed an English Teacher for the purpose of board exams. The student had no exposure to English beyond his textbooks.

Critical Comment: The student scored only 13 marks. The student had fulfilled the task of answering all the questions but had not written to the word limit that was expected. A sample transcript of the answer pertaining to hints development question is given in figure 2-

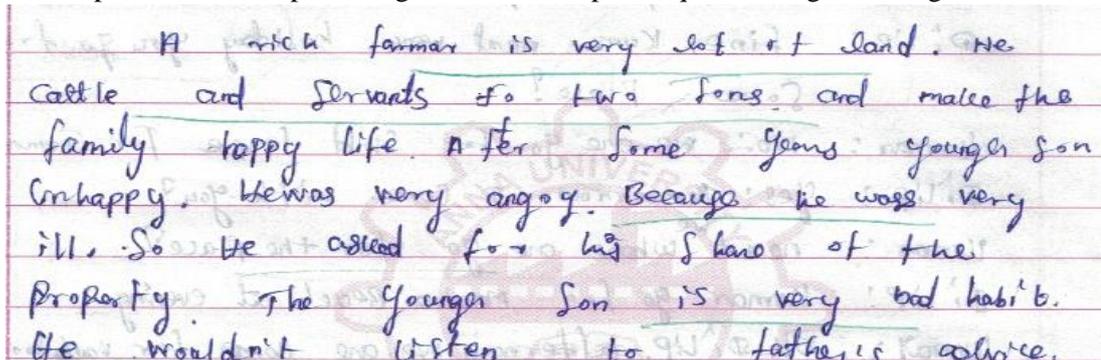


Figure 2. Sample transcript of Student B

The student had fulfilled the task of giving a suitable title as mentioned in the question. The student had used all the hints given while writing the passage. There was no dearth in content and all the ideas were put forth cohesively but had made errors in grammar and lacked in completing the sentences effectively. The student had chosen the topic, "The Most Memorable Day in My Life" for the essay and had written for just 120 words. The student made mistakes in grammar, mixed the tenses while writing the essay and further had spelling errors. The student had simply rewritten the sentences given in the question paper for the question relating to paragraph writing without adding any new sentence. Dialogue writing, formal and informal letters lacked content, organization, errors in grammar and were not written to the expected word limit.

Student C: The student is doing B.E. Civil Engineering at Anna University, Chennai. The student had scored 148 on 200 in English in the 12th std public examination. The student hails from a village called Melvonnur in Vellore District, Tamil Nadu. The student finished schooling in a Panchayat School present in the village. The parents are illiterate and work as farmers under a landlord. Their annual income is only 40,000/- per annum and the family relies entirely on the benefits provided by the government to sustain their living. The student had English teacher in 11th and 12th but only 2 classes were allotted per week.

Critical Comment: The student scored only 11 marks. The student had not answered all the questions and had omitted the question pertaining to formal letter. A sample transcript of the dialogue writing is given below-

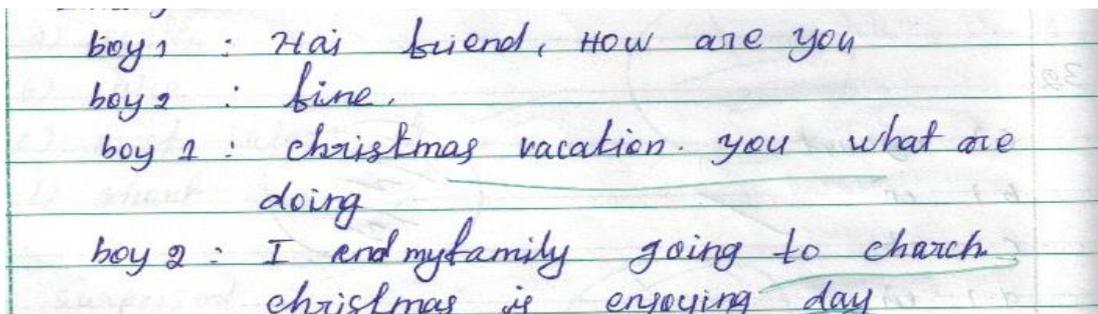


Figure 3. Sample transcript of Student C

The student had not fulfilled the task of giving suitable names to the speakers of the dialogue and had not written to the expected word limit. The content was very less and featured errors in grammar and sentence formation etc. The student had chosen the topic “The Most Memorable Day in My Life” for the essay but had written for just 56 words with errors pertaining to grammar, spellings and lack of coherence was evident in the essay etc. The student had simply rewritten the sentences given in the question paper for the question relating to paragraph writing without adding any new sentence. The student had the required content for the question pertaining to hints development and wrote by giving heading to the paragraphs but had not given a suitable title for the passage. The question pertaining to informal letter lacked content, organization, errors in grammar and was not written to the expected word limit.

6. Findings and Analysis of the Student’s Performance

It was shocking to note that the very same students who had secured decent marks in their 12th standard public examinations were not able to score well in the test conducted upon their immediate entry in the tertiary level despite choosing the questions from their previous board exams. These students had English as their second language and were exposed to the language from the primary level to some extent. The results are a reflection of the lack of competent teaching and the lack of resources or materials that can help the students to understand the language in an efficient and simple manner.

7. Recommendations

In order to improve and enhance the level of English amongst mother tongue medium students entering the tertiary level, certain approaches or changes should immediately take effect. Firstly, the curriculum should feature a separate syllabus for these students. This will enable them to have a liking towards the language and motive them to learn it. It is not possible for these students to take up the syllabus prescribed for all. Further, the materials prepared for these students should be simple and easily understandable. The exercises and questions in the materials should not frighten them to have an aversion to the language. Finally, the teachers appointed to teach English to these students should understand their background, but not teach the subject using mother tongue. However, for explaining the tasks relating to group work, pair work and other forms of tasks or exercises, the teacher can explain in mother tongue so as to enable the students to perform the task without any misunderstanding. Good teachers, high motivation and encouragement and a viable atmosphere to study and learn English will surely enable the mother tongue medium students to excel in the language. Last but not the least, the students coming from the mother tongue medium should have a different criterion with regards to assessment and evaluation. This will certainly have a direct influence on their learning and ensure that the student’s self- confidence isn’t ruined.

8. Conclusion

Language and Society are two faces of the same coin. In a nation that is so diverse like India regionalism, casteism, poverty and to a certain extent even people clearly influence the minds of the students and determine the outcome and the output in a logical way. An environment that is literate promotes visual and verbal literacy through the use of displaying the elements and resources required for learning. Finally, Economics prevailing in the society also influences the student. Globalization affords the opportunity to bounce certain traditional stages of economic growth, and get closer rapidly with those nations with English as the native language.

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