

Paradigms and Practices in Improving Writing Skills of Management Students

Abebe Tilahun

Head, Department of English, Dilla University, Dilla, Ethiopia

Abstract: *Improving writing skills in English is an important concern to the teachers and learners at undergraduate level. Good writing skills enable the students to communicate effectively during and after their studies. The learners need to have a certain amount of L2 background knowledge about the rhetorical organizations, appropriate language use or specific lexicon with which they want to communicate to their readers.*

A study is conducted among Dilla University students to know their interests, needs and learning preferences. This study also facilitates the teachers to know the pulse of the graduate students which helps them to plan and execute their class work. The researcher collected data from the present and previous students who are employed in various organizations and are using English for communication in work places. This data helps us to know the learners needs, to promote the curriculum of English Writing Skills Course and to advance learners' writing competence. Against this background, the present paper focuses on the analysis of students' needs and then suggests a few steps to improve the materials and methods to foster the writing proficiency of undergraduate students. The study tries to enable the learners to take the responsibility to improve their writing skills by analyzing and addressing their needs.

Key Words: *Improving Writing Skills, Management students, Needs Analysis, Learning-Centered Approach.*

Introduction:

English is an important international language. Presently, it is used as a business, scientific, technological, educational and diplomatic language of the world. It is considered that the success of educational objectives is highly dependent on the adequate knowledge and use of English both by the students and teachers. It needs competence in the four language skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing and in the four aspects – Grammar, Spelling, Pronunciation and Vocabulary. Writing is one of the skills of language learning which is important for students in their academic and future career. Bean added that “Writing is a skill that is not only valued in academia; good writing skills are very important for the enhancement of our students' and professional lives”. Writing is important productive skill and learners at all

levels in general and at graduate level in particular need a considerable amount of writing for various purposes. Bacha and Bahous opine that writing is very important in working places for effective correspondence and documents such as e-mails, letters, reports, proposals, etc. Keeping this in view, writing courses offered at University level should target on skills related to students' academic needs and future career to ensure that the learners are well equipped with the required writing skills in order for them to perform in academic and at the work place.

The general aim of *English Writing Skills Course* is to help students improve their writing skills in following their academic studies and to be competent in their future career. Several efforts have been made at different times to improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching English language skills. Such endeavours resulted several changes in teaching from grammar oriented teaching to communicative language teaching. In spite of these improvements, there are a few concerns to deal with regard to the writing skills of the learners. One of the concerns is students' low performance in written communication. Teachers, employers and other stakeholders in the area complain about the performance of learners in writing. Against this background, the present study focuses to analyze the needs of Business Management students' specific English writing needs in relation to *English Writing Skills Course* offered at Dilla University and to address their needs by suggesting a few steps to improve the materials and methods to foster the writing proficiency of undergraduate students.

Review of Literature

Writing is an important skill in both academic and occupational settings. In EAP – English for academic purpose, from elementary school through university graduate courses, students write to succeed in mastering the subject matter. Academic writing ranges from sentences level to short paragraphs, essays and even research papers. In an EOP - English for occupational purpose context, writing is more concerned with the content and format while in an EAP context, writing focuses more on writing techniques such as process and development of idea and logic (on line). Sidey claims that in an EOP context, emphasizing the difference in writing purposes and the resultant text structure are crucial in order to match the needs of the work place skills. Furthermore, according to Baynham, to characterize the knowledge and skills of a good writer, the need to emphasize the dimension of the required metalinguistic must exist. For example, the awareness of the different types of texts as well as the pragmatics is an important dimension. Thus, in ESP – English for specific purpose contexts, the types of texts have to be explicit and related to students needs. The interests and the needs of the students are necessary for them to realize the significance in acquiring the skill.

Braine claims that students of various disciplines demands a variation of academic information processing sequence, as well as putting more emphasis on the contributory skills. By contributory skills, he means those skills that require the student to use their linguistic abilities as well as their understanding of subject matter to write essays that are acceptable to the reader.

These are skills like summary skills, paraphrase, note making and so on. Thus, Business Management students need to learn both the class room language and writing skills for future job and the writing skills and activities for the study purposes. Hence, both, EAP and EOP, which are branches of ESP, are essential for them, for the success of the study at the University and as candidate business managers. Writing is the central component of learning and assessment in all disciplines in higher education. According to Bean, nurturing good writing enhances student in learning and develops both their critical thinking and active problem solving abilities. He also added that good writing skills are very important for the enhancement of our students' personal and professional lives. Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many. Moreover, Bechard points out that writing in the business sector promotes active learning, with students using hands-on activities to apply theory to real world problems. Bechard also added that the writing activities enhanced team skills, research skills, critical thinking skills, and analytical skills.

The ability to communicate effectively is important for everyone who wants to succeed in the business world. Furthermore, as Dobrian added, e-mail and other on line services are very widespread, often replacing telephone and face-to-face meetings. Besides, with English becoming the international language of business, more people are writing it and business executives must be able to communicate in this growing international culture. From the above discussion it is possible to say that writing is very essential for business management students to be successful in their academic subjects as well as in their future career. Regarding this, Brown and Paapanen found that graduates of accounting and business need quality writing and speaking communication skills in order to be successful at work.

According to Jordan, TSA – Target situation analysis is rigorously devised model of all in the development of needs analysis in Munby's communicative Needs, processor 'which gives the profile of students communicative needs. Munby's model gives more emphasis in students' needs at the end of a language program and target-level performance preparing students for later job or for study in a particular context. Here it is apt to say that TSA should take in to account the learners' training and job requirements in order that English course helps them to accomplish different tasks in their specific discipline or prefer in duties or jobs in a good way after the completion of their ESP course. In relation to this, Jordan points out "subject specific language, and its organization, has been subjected to various types of analysis over a long period of time, starting register analysis, followed by discourse analysis and more recently, genre analysis." And these will be looked at under target situation analysis as it incorporates all of them.

Data Collection and Analysis

An investigation in to the students target and present situation needs in both Business Management students and graduates are made with questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and class room observation. This is done through target writing needs of English writing and its

activities in both for their course studies and future jobs. Additionally, the students' ability in writing skill and activities, their writing difficulties, learning styles/preferences, reasons for taking the writing course would be investigated. The students, instructors and employees questionnaire were adapted from the questionnaire employed by Munby, Dudley-Evans and John, Berhane Demeke and Beyene Wako.

The students' questionnaire consisted of 11 items with sub sections with some. The questionnaire was made up of different close ended items (multiple question and rating). However, students were given chances to include whatever they thought were needed in the study. The instructors' questionnaire consisted of five questions for English teachers which consist of sub-questions and seven questions for major area course teachers. The English teachers' questionnaire consists of questions about the degree of satisfaction they have about the course material they have been using in addition to the questions included in the subject area teachers and the learners. The employees' questionnaire consisted of five items. The items in the questionnaire were aimed at gathering information on graduates' writing proficiency, their writing difficulties and their writing needs. A total of 555 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to 70 students, 18 instructors and 15 employees/ graduates. Of these 554 copies (a response rate 99.8 %) were properly filled and used for the study. A semi-structured interview questions were used. The purpose of the interview was to validate the data gathered through the questionnaire and further explore students writing needs and difficulties. Therefore, the content of the interview was similar to that of the questionnaire. Dudley Evans and John state that oral interview is extremely useful in needs analysis. The interview questions were adapted and used for this research from Munby, and Berhane Demeke. The semi-structured interview was conducted with 2 English teachers, 3 subject instructors and 6 students. These groups of respondents were selected using simple random sampling method.

The other data collection instrument in this study was classroom observation. The purpose of this instrument was to collect authentic data backing up and giving life of data gathered with the help of other instruments. Regarding the importance of observation, Dudley-Evans and John claim that for needs analysis it can cover a range of activities from watching a particular task being performed to shadowing individuals at work. The observation protocol was adapted from Basturkmen and Dudley-Evans and St John and was conducted on both second and third year Business Management classes. Six periods with three courses ('Entrepreneurship', 'International Marketing', and 'Management Information System') were observed two periods for each course. Data gathered through questionnaires were tallied and then calculated using percentage and analyzed quantitatively. The response of the students and the teachers were compared and contrasted to arrive at sound conclusion. Data gathered through semi-structured interview, classroom observations and text analysis were analyzed qualitatively. Both qualitative and quantitative data were presented and analyzed separately. However, cross-references were

made to different pieces of information gathered through questionnaire, interview and observation.

Analysis of the purpose of taking “English Writing Skills Course” as perceived by the students:

	Purpose of learning the Writing course	F	%
A	Academic studies	44	62.8
B	Communicate with English speakers	5	7.1
C	Future occupation	38	54.3
D	Pass tests	2	2.8

Analysis of students’ difficulty in micro-skills as perceived by students and subject area instructors:

No	Items		Very great difficulty		Great difficulty		Some difficulty		Little difficulty		No difficulty	
			F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
A	Writing notes from lectures	S	14	20	26	37.1	16	22.8	13	18.6	1	1.4
		I	2	25	4	50	2	25				
B	Writing notes from books/references	S	4	5.7	10	14.3	20	28.6	24	34.3	12	17.1
		I	1	12.5	2	25	4	50	1	12.5		
C	Writing assignments	S	9	12.8	23	32.8	29	41.4	7	10	2	2.8
		I	2	25	3	37.5	2	25	1	12.5		
D	Writing essay tests or exams	S	11	15.7	28	40	26	37.1	5	7.1		
		I	3	37.5	4	50	1	12.5				
E	Writing business reports	S	6	8.6	28	40	22	31.4	12	17.1	2	2.8
		I	2	25	3	37.5	3	37.5				
F	Writing semester term papers	S	18	25.7	20	28.6	17	24.3	14	20	1	1.4
		I	1	12.5	5	62.5	2	25				
G	Writing dictations	S			1	1.4	20	28.6	40	57.1	9	12.8
		I			1	12.5	3	37.5	4	50		
H	Summarizing something read	S	12	17.1	22	31.4	26	37.1	6	8.6	4	5.7
		I	2	25	2	25	4	50				
I	Writing business letters	S	8	11.4	19	27.1	30	42.8	10	14.3	3	4.3
		I	1	12.5	3	37.5	3	37.5	1	12.5		
J	Writing memos	S	9	12.8	21	30	30	42.8	6	8.6	4	5.7

		I	1	12.5	2	25	3	37.5	2	25		
K	Writing resumes and application letters	S	5	7.1	21	30	37	48.6	6	8.6	4	5.7
		I	2	25	3	37.5	2	25	1	12.5		
M	Completing formal reports and proposals	S	5	7.1	20	28.6	29	41.4	12	17.1	4	5.7
L	Writing business proposals	S	16	22.8	21	30	26	37.1	7	10		
		I	2	25	3	37.5	3	37.5				
		I			2	25	4	50	1	12.5	1	12.5
N	Writing direct requests	S	8	11.4	26	37.1	24	34.3	8	11.4	4	5.7
		I	2	25	3	37.5	2	25	1	12.5		
O	Writing letters of (order, (guarantee, warranty, credit, refusal)	S	7	10	26	37.1	18	25.7	15	21.4	4	5.7
		I			3	37.5	4	50	1	12.5		

Key: Student

I= Instructor

Assessment of the students' methodological preferences/learning styles:

	Methodological preferences	Very satisfied		Satisfied		Undecided		Less satisfied		Not satisfied at all	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
In class how would you like learning?											
A	Writing individually	13	18.6	22	31.4	13	18.6	18	25.7	4	5.7
B	Writing in pairs	14	20	28	40	13	18.6	8	11.4	7	10
C	Writing in small groups	34	48.6	18	25.7	8	11.4	10	14.3		
D	Writing in one group			9	12.8	5	7.1	32	45.7	24	34.3
How would you like learning? By:											
A	Writing compositions	29	41.4	22	31.4	18	25.7	1	1.4		
B	Listening to the teacher and taking notes	16	22.8	29	41.4	13	18.6	7	10	5	7.1
14	Writing everything to my note book	14	20	7	10	28	40	7	10		20

When you write you like to be corrected by:											
A	Students	22	31.4	20	28.6	16	22.8	8	11.4	4	5.4
B	Teachers	26	37.1	25	35.7	12	17.1	9	12.8	10	14.3
C	Yourself	23	32.8	22	31.4	12	17.1	12	17.1	1	1.4
D	Immediately in the class	32	45.7	28	40	6	8.6	4	5.7		
E	Later privately	21	30	29	41.4	13	18.6	6	8.6	1	1.4

Analysis of the Importance of the Four Academic Genre Types in the Context of Business Management Department:

Academic Genre Types		Very frequently Used		Frequently used		Sometimes used		Rarely used		Never used	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Description	S	41	58.6	14	20	13	18.6	2	2.8		
	I	12	70.6	4	23.5	1	5.9				
Narration	S	21	30	25	35.7	19	27.1	5	7.1		
	I	5	29.4	3	17.6	5	29.4	2	11.8	2	11.8
Exposition	S	19	27.1	20	28.6	18	25.7	13	18.6		
	I	6	35.3	4	23.5	3	17.6	4	23.5		
Argumentation	S	24	34.3	18	25.7	16	22.8	7	10	5	7.1
	I	9	52.9	5	29.4	2	17.6	1	5.9		

According to the students' response the most frequently needed writing activities in order of priority are: writing notes from lectures, writing essay tests or exams, writing notes from reference books, summarizing something read, completing formal reports and proposals, writing assignments, writing resumes and application letters, writing dictations, writing direct requests and writing memos. According to the instructors' responses, writing notes from lectures; writing essay tests or exams; writing assignments; summarizing something read and writing business

letters; writing notes from books/ references and writing business reports; writing semester term papers, writing dictations, writing memos and writing resumes and application letters; writing business proposals followed by completing formal reports and proposals, writing direct requests and writing letters are the most frequently needed writing activities in this order of priority.

The writing ability of graduates/employees as perceived by themselves:

Item	Very good		Good		Average		Weak		Very weak	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Writing ability			3	20	8	53.3	4	26.7		

Assessment of the relative importance of the genre types for occupational settings:

Writing types	Very frequently needed		Frequently needed		Sometimes needed		Seldom needed		Never needed	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
A Description	6	40	7	46.7	2	13.3				
B Narration	1	6.7	5	33.3	7	46.7	2	13.3		
C Exposition	5	33.3	7	46.7	2	13.3	1	6.7		
D Argumentation	3	20	5	33.3	4	26.7	3	20		

Assessment of the use of writing activities in occupational settings:

No	Activities	Very frequently		Frequently		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
A	Writing memos/minutes of meetings	2	13.3	6	40	4	26.7	2	13.3	1	6.7
B	Writing vacancy notices	2	13.3	4	26.7	6	40	3	20		
C	Writing business reports	4	26.7	3	20	2	13.3	4	26.7	2	13.3
D	Writing business proposals	2	13.3	3	20	8	53.3	2	13.3		
E	Writing advertisements	1	6.7	3	20	2	13.3	9	60		
F	Writing e-mails	2	13.3	6	40	5	33.3	2	13.3		
G	Writing notes from seminars /conferences	3	20	3	20	5	33.3	2	13.3	2	13.3

H	Writing business letters	5	33.3	4	26.7	5	33.3	1	6.7		
I	Writing resumes and application letters	1	6.7	5	33.3	7	46.7	2	13.3		
J	Completing formal reports and proposals	3	20	2	13.3	5	33.3	3	20	2	13.3
K	Writing direct requests	2	13.3	4	26.7	5	33.3	3	20	1	6.7
L	Writing fax messages	3	20	4	26.7	3	20	3	20	2	13.3
M	Writing letter of (order, guarantee, warranty, credit, refusal etc).	2	13.3	2	13.3	3	20	5	33.3	3	20

Employees ranked writing business letters, writing office memos/minutes of meetings, writing e-mails, writing business reports, writing fax messages, writing vacancy notices, writing notes from seminars/ conferences, writing resumes and application letters, writing direct requests, writing business proposals, completing formal requests and proposals, writing advertisements and writing letters of order, guarantee, warranty, credit, refusal etc were frequently needed writing activities. The questionnaire analysis corroborates with other findings on the usefulness of the course. The majority of the students found that the course is useful in the enhancement of their academic writing skills. They also found the course is to be improved in a few areas to meet their present and future needs. Besides, students reported some 'by-products' of the course, including improvement in their general English skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing emails as well as collaboration with other people.

Discussion and Conclusions

Writing is an individual effort as one composes one's thoughts often-in privacy and then turn their thoughts to writing, using strict conventions followed in the language. Writing is conscious and is thus non-spontaneous. During teaching writing skill, the discrete nature of linguistic signs should be appreciated consciously. The learner must recognize the sound structure of each word, dissect it and reproduce it in alphabetical symbols, which s/he must have studied and memorized before. This preparation to put words in sentences with a sequence is prominent in the acquisition of the skill.

Writing can be viewed and taught as a developmental process like reading. As Bowen suggested the skill is developed in four stages:

- Beginning stage – developing Mechanics of writing
- Elementary stage – developing extended use of language
- Intermediate stage – developing writing with purpose
- Advanced stage – developing writing expository prose

Raimes classifies approaches to teaching writing into five types: controlled to free, free writing, paragraph pattern, grammar-syntax organization, communicative, and process approaches. In controlled to free approach, students are first given sentence exercises, then paragraphs to copy or manipulate grammatically, like changing questions to statements, present to past, or plural to singular, and changing words or clauses or combine sentences. In free writing approach, students are asked to write freely on any topic without worrying about grammar and spelling for five or ten minutes. Teachers generally read them and perhaps comment on the ideas the writer expressed. In paragraph pattern approach, students copy paragraphs, analyze the form of model paragraphs, and imitate model passages. They put scrambled sentences into paragraph order, they identify general specific statements, they choose or invent an appropriate topic sentence and they insert or delete sentences.

In communicative approach to writing, students are asked to assume the role of a writer who is writing for an audience to read. Whatever a student writes something, it is modified in some way by other students for better communicative effect. In the process approach to writing, students move away from concentration on the written product to an emphasis on the process of writing. It is important to use these approaches in a proper blend for better results. For example, the controlled to free approach to writing helps teacher to focus on proper mechanics in the beginning level, whereas communicative approach to writing is very effective once students have some control over the mechanics, have acquired a good number of words besides sentence structures to help them match these with their thoughts. All successful texts and teachers have tried to take the best and relevant aspects of every method to suit the learner's level and need.

Correction: Correction of the students' scripts is a crucial phenomenon to correct errors / mistakes at all level so that standards in spelling and expression are set for the learners. Raimes suggests that it is always suggestible to use errors / mistakes in the written texts to plan the next classes. It would be always result yielding to give students time and opportunity to correct errors before teacher evaluate the script. If students' erroneous views of expression are not corrected, they consolidate those faulty means of written communication and a sense of self-sufficiency sets in their minds.

Speed of Writing: Though it is very difficult to match speed of learners' thoughts with their writing speed, at every stage, focus on writing faster and reading faster with comprehension is to be increased. Slow writing is problematic in timed test situations. Dictation exercises with the increase in pace would be helpful in improving the speed of writing. Conduct of cloze tests will give good results. The objective is not to increase the number of words per minute, but to increase the speed of organizing thought in the second language and of judging and producing in a style that will be compatible with the first part of the passage.

Teachers also need to deal with the appropriate rhetoric of the field using English. Rhetoric and logic play a more crucial role than linguistic structures. However, it is always important and useful to refresh the second language learner of English about the spelling, vocabulary, diction and structure errors s/he continues to commit. Students will continue to commit linguistic errors even as they try to master the rhetorical and logical expressions. The following factors that are responsible for the success of the learning environment are identified from the study and are illustrated below:

- 1. Description of the Subject Matter:** The accurate description of the subject matter allows to define learning goals and to identify the kind of knowledge / skills that are to be learnt / acquired. This description leads to the learning goal of a differentiated understanding of communicative needs. The subject matter requires the de- and re- automation of the skills that are to be fostered.
- 2. Authentic Learning Scenarios:** A basic assumption of situated learning approaches is the authenticity of the learning scenario. The context of learning should be similar to the context in which the acquired knowledge and skills are used in everyday life. The writing orientation and activities need to be embedded into an authentic learning scenario. The execution of materials / methods is conducted based on realistic situations.
- 3. Willingness to Participate:** Willingness to practice writing for improvement is crucial as it needs learner's involvement. Using words for writing practice from the student's immediate environment and later on from speaking and reading activities is appropriate and useful. The writing skills orientation must be easy to participate and need to create interest to move to the next level of writing.
- 4. Obligatory Participation:** Writing texts with peer correction and then teacher correction is to be embedded into the *English Writing Skills Course* curriculum. This provides the climate for obligatory participation to all learners. Once the learners start receiving the profits from the writing tasks, they voluntarily participate in various activities for improving their abilities of communication.

- 5. Adaptability of the Material:** No two writing skills trainings are the same. It is important to emphasize different contents to adapt training to the needs / interests of the participants. Thus, it is necessary for a writing skills improvement environment, which is integrated into such training, to be adaptable to the special situation of training. Communication skills through writing needs to provide choice to the knowledge and interests of the learner. The teacher has the possibility to integrate different materials into the training environment and to switch on / off diverse instructional features.

Thus, overall, the course seems to have achieved the objectives it set out to achieve, i.e., in helping students to recognize the general characteristics of academic writing, recognize the grammar and style of academic writing in their own discipline, present well organized ideas in formal English, interpret data and academic texts, write a simple critique, write a data commentary, and write a report. Nonetheless, it is evident that some students still expressed difficulties in the use of words, grammar, and generation and organization of ideas, though it is readily acknowledged that eradication of all these problem areas from our students should not be the task of *English Writing Skills Course* instructors alone. The improvement of language proficiency, in general, and abilities of writing, in particular, is a life-long process. This endeavour may be expedited by a passionate pursuit on the part of learners themselves, targeted language and communication programmes on the part of the class work and outside-of-class institutionalized support systems on the part of the University.

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