

ESL Academic Writing: A Course Curriculum Necessity for the Higher Education Institutes of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the necessity of academic writing courses in the higher educational institutes of Arunachal Pradesh. Academic writing is an integral component of higher education. It not only facilitates effective communication and critical thinking but also prepares learners for the demands of their academic and professional lives. Hence, this paper highlights the problems and the current situation of academic writing practices in the higher educational institutes of the state.*

Keywords: Academic Writing, Arunachal Pradesh, Critical Thinking, ESL, Higher Educational Institutes

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Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh, erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), is one of the eight states in North-East India. This state enjoys the pride of housing 26 unique tribes and several sub-tribes who speak their own languages and dialects and follow their distinct culture and tradition. Higher education in Arunachal Pradesh refers to all types of education – Academic, Professional, Technological, Vocational, Teacher Education, Medical, Law, Engineering and Polytechnics that is provided in different institutions such as universities and colleges for which students need to complete their secondary school education (Yaying & Degi, 2022, p. 25). English language plays a prominent role for the educational and administrative purposes in the state. It is the official language of the state and the medium of instruction in all levels of formal education. The higher education sector of India, in recent decades, has witnessed a tremendous growth in many aspects such as its institutional capacity, enrolment, and teacher-student ratio, etc. (Yaying & Degi, 2022, p. 24). Arunachal Pradesh in the past five decades has made a substantial stride in the educational sector. The 1961 census reported literacy rate of the state to be 7.13%, 2011 census reported literacy rate of 66.95%. Academic writing in the higher studies especially in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context like India/Arunachal Pradesh remains a challenge for the L2 learners. This paper discusses the necessity of academic writing courses in the higher educational institutes of Arunachal Pradesh understanding that academic writing is an integral component of higher education and it is necessary for effective communication and critical thinking to prepare learners to meet the demands of their academic and professional lives. Hence, this paper highlights the problems and the current situation of academic writing practices in the higher educational institutes of the state and suggests how to put effective measures in place in the courses offered to bridge the gap of ESL learners in academic writing.

Academic Writing

Writing is often acknowledged to be the most challenging skill to master for L2 learners (Bailey 2006, Jordan 2012, Byrne 1993). Acquiring writing skills require formal instruction and practice, especially in terms of grammar and discourse. Writing as a productive skill requires presentation of meanings and messages in the written form. In the process of writing, one explores the ideas of the context, prior knowledge and discourse. Writing in its transactional purpose must convey message accurately and

effectively and for this, focus on accuracy of details and effectiveness in presentation of matter have to be constantly maintained.

Academic writing can be defined as a writing undertaken to fulfill a course requirement of a college or university education. Academic writing is used to communicate obtained knowledge in a specific subject area and is also used for publications that are read by teachers and researchers or presented at conferences. A very broad definition of academic writing could include any writing assignment given in an academic context. Monipally and Pawar (2010) define academic writing as a “means of documenting and communicating scientific knowledge” (p.4). It is a process of documenting and communicating the research process and research outcomes. While this knowledge, on the one end, enables the writer progress academically, on the other end informs people who are part of that discourse community, of the findings or knowledge that could be considered reliable. There are several kinds of academic writing such as books, translation, essays, research paper or research articles, conference paper, academic journal, dissertation and thesis. “Academic writing differs from other types of writing such as journalistic or creative writing. In most forms of academic writing a detached and objective approach is required. An academic argument appeals to logic and provides evidence in support of an intellectual position” (Fitzmaurice and O’Farell, p.6). Unlike creative or journalistic writing, academic writing employs formal language; it avoids colloquial words and expressions. It must be cohesive and contain logically organized flow of ideas in which various parts are connected to form a coherent whole. Therefore, the arguments and statements provided in an academic writing are to be substantiated by evidences.

The three important features of academic writing are formal language, objectivity and ample references and citations (Fitzmaurice and O’Farell, p.6). One of the most easily observed convention of academic writing is citing of the sources of data or views borrowed from others which are important because it allows readers to identify the source used and verify findings and conclusions. In academic writing facts and figures are given precisely. Further, objectivity is the hallmark of any academic writing. Clear use of language is essential in academic writing; it has fewer words so that the reader or writer does not have to beat around the bush. The emphasis is on the information and the arguments. Importantly, it is the responsibility of the L2 writer to make the reader comfortable about how the various parts of the text are related. This is achieved by paying sensitive attention to writing clear grammatically correct sentences with punctuations, vocabulary and good and readable paragraph constructions. It is aimed at informing rather than entertaining. Academic writing is fundamentally a reader-oriented writing, written for academic audience therefore it involves knowledge of all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing (Bjork & Raisanen, 2006, Swales & Feak, 2012, Jordan, 2012).

Academic writing unlike other forms of writing hence follows a set of principles that observes the conventions of discourse community. These, conventions apart from enabling writers identify themselves with community, are flexible and can change according to the purpose, readership, the needs of the writer and community. These conventions are not, as they are usually misinterpreted, a set of grammatical rules that one needs to use in documenting the data; rather they are conceptual frames of reference that direct both the process and product of scientific investigation and its documentation. Hence, the major responsibility in the process of documentation lays on the ability of the writer to interpret and perform the shared academic conventions of communication as they are realized.

Silva and Leki (2004) succinctly describe the aims and objectives of academic writing as follows:

The aim of academic writing is to recreate, as well as, possible, the conditions under which actual university writing takes place and to help learners recognize and produce features of generic forms that would be acceptable at an English-medium institution of higher learning, while at the same time acknowledging and alerting learners to the dynamic nature of genre (Silva & Leki, 2004, p.6).

It is thus understood that recognition and production of generic forms of language forms depends on the established codes or the established social norms of conduct. In other words, academically valued writing aims at enabling the writer to produce texts that are acceptable to teachers or other members of the same community.

Significance of Academic Writing in Higher Education

Higher education learners are deemed to be at the pinnacle of their formal education and they thus are required to possess expected level of proficiency in English as a second language to meet their educational and professional needs. Learners at this level are expected to achieve academic excellence and earn the advanced degree. Learners are assessed and graded based primarily on their writing proficiency; be it in the examinations or other forms of writing tasks. Henceforth, writing skills is the plank for gauging learners' knowledge of the subject and language in most of the higher education institutes. As a language skill, writing skill has to be learned, this transferrable and versatile skill is quite often neglected in schools and colleges. Writing skill emphasizes well-formedness. One requires metalinguistic knowledge and the skill of using this knowledge in writing. The reliance on metalinguistic competence signifies that the rules of written discourse are learned largely through instruction and practice (Hyland, 2003).

Academic writing is a crucial component of education, particularly at the higher studies. It plays a multifaceted role in the educational process, serving various purposes and benefits. Learners at the higher institutions are required to acquaint themselves with wide varieties of academic writing in various disciplines. Academic papers across disciplines differ, and the extent to which a learner requires to exercise academic writing skills and the forms of academic writing requirement vary across departments. Many disciplines in social sciences, natural sciences and technical departments prescribe academic writing as a mandatory requirement for completion of a degree. Academic writing in higher education is not only a testing tool to award grades but also a means to enhance subject knowledge and linguistic skills. The basic objective of academic writing at this level is not to only enable learners to develop critical and analytical thinking but also to help them become proficient users of L2. It requires learners' motivation, interest, aptitude, and research skills. Effective academic writing is vital to success in higher education and professional life beyond the university.

In university and technical institutes academic writing cannot simply be wished away. Academic writing is crucial for growth and enrichment of important skills for a successful career after the completion of studies. It is a complex process and it involves succinctly stating the purpose and presenting information in a simplistic enough manner for the readers to understand while maintaining the tone of an academic piece. Writing is a thinking tool and academic writing is the most important part of curriculum, engaging these learners in academic writing, facilitates critical thinking and systematic articulation that has the potential to create a lasting and meaningful impact on the readers. Academic writing in the higher educational institutes is thus very important.

Proficiency in English in academic writing is increasingly required for all kinds of academic papers. Some of the most important reasons are to fulfill the course curriculum requirements by acquiring discipline knowledge and language proficiency and exhibiting these skills through communicative mediums such as examinations, and miniscule and extended research in forms of project report, field survey, and dissertation.

Acquiring writing skill in the target language is vital part of learning a second language and it has to be mastered by the learners before they come to university. But, generally they lack the language skills required to write a good academic piece even at this level.

Higher Education Learners and Academic Writing in the State of Arunachal Pradesh

Studies show that higher education learners struggle to write for academic purposes. According to Lin and Morrison (2021), three factors are responsible for the difficulties among L2 learners in academic writing: the complex nature of academic texts, the target audience that the writers have to keep in mind, and the need for critical thinking ability on the part of the writers. Further, the lack of adequate writing proficiency in English adds to their problems.

ESL learners of Arunachal Pradesh mostly possess a general understanding of grammar rules but writing acceptable academic papers is difficult for most of them, since most of the institutions do not explicitly teach academic writing. As a result, learners remain largely unaware of the linguistic conventions and standards observed in academic writing. The common practice in schools and colleges is that writing skills are not taught directly with tips, feedbacks and guidance. In most cases, it is assumed that writing skills will be acquired automatically as students write answers to textbook exercises and tests and examinations. Furthermore, the courses in the higher educational institutes of Arunachal Pradesh do little to help learners in developing academic writing skills. For an ESL learner without necessary linguistic and stylistics requirements of academic writing, it can be very difficult to achieve clarity in a research paper.

Academic writing in English at higher level of study is a difficult and challenging task for ESL learners. Moreover, no remedial measures are in place at the tertiary level to address the academic writing needs of the learners. This impedes the academic literacy of most of the learners in Arunachal Pradesh. Writing in academic context has been a less focused area of ELT in the higher education institutions of Arunachal Pradesh. It is mainly viewed as a testing tool- the practice of assessing learners based on their writing abilities in examinations. The writing problems among these learners emanate from poor language proficiency and lack of knowledge of aspects of academic writing. Writing skills are not explicitly taught- there is a little opportunity to practise L2 academic writing outside the classroom and much of the development of academic writing among the students is self-directed, where these learners have to learn it by themselves.

Challenges of Teaching Academic Writing to learners in Arunachal Pradesh

The research into L1 and relatively recent research into L2 writing have begun to inform the writing instructional materials and classroom methodologies. However, this influence has kept the higher education institutions of the state largely unaffected due to lack of resources in terms of human and educational logistics. Further, a lack of awareness about the importance of academic writing is apparent. The absence of academic writing resources in higher education institutes maybe due to the actors mentioned above.

Some of the challenges of teaching and learning of academic writing in an ESL context like Arunachal Pradesh can be attributed to following factors:

First of all, studies suggest that writing typically suffers from a lack of interaction, which promotes the production of speech in a conversation (Shafie, Maesin, Osman, Nayan, & Mansor, 2010). Learners are often required to use outside sources and adopt the techniques and genres of academic discourse in higher education (Tardy, 2010, p. 12). Additionally, learners' lack of confidence in their writing abilities limits their capacity to make revision selections and makes it difficult for them to defend those choices to those who provided the feedback, particularly when there was conflicting feedback from other instructors (Can, 2009, p. 25). It is also nearly impossible for the learners to transfer their L1 skills into L2 writing since the state is a multilingual without a common or individual native script.

Secondly, teachers often complain that ESL learners lack the knowledge and essential writing skills needed for academic writing, such as the knowledge of outlining, paraphrasing, and summarizing (Al-khasawneh & Maher, 2010).

Thirdly, Academic writing often demands learners to write from a view point of an expert despite them being a novice in their subjects (Tardy, 2010). Elander et al., (2006) opine that essays provide opportunities for L2 learners to exhibit some of the most demanding learning outcomes; however, majority of these learners are confused about what constitutes a good essay (p. 72). To add to the problem, in an ESL context the teachers also struggle in their role of assisting L2 learners with academic writing. While they all acknowledge the importance and necessity of assisting learners, they are themselves not sure about what the advice should be (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010, p. 175). Additionally, poor language proficiency remains a significant issue among the L2 learners.

Conclusion

Considering the issues raised in the sections above, it is necessary to implement academic writing course in the higher educational institutes of Arunachal Pradesh. An eclectic approach combining various approaches to teach academic writing should be formulated. Further, to facilitate discipline specific academic writing skills, ESP courses should be considered as a much needed intervention to mitigate the language problems and academic writing difficulties of the learners. The course can be implemented as an elective subject or can be embedded within a core course in their first and second semester of study. Reasonable amount of time should be given to learners so that they learn academic writing in an efficient manner. As much of academic writing learners do is self-directed with minimal support and feedback from the teachers, it is then imperative to encourage the importance of constructive feedback among teachers to ensure the handling of the student drafts, and help them with relevant materials. Furthermore, teachers and not just learners should be offered academic writing support through teacher training programmes. Moreover, it appears necessary to put effective measures in place in the courses offered to bridge the gap of ESL learners in academic writing.

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