

Article

Challenges in Developing Writing Skills at the Undergraduate Level

Dr. Rajesh Sakharam Gore

Head, Department of English, Toshniwal Arts, Commerce & Science College, Sengaon, India;
rsgore5880@gmail.com

Accepted version published on 22nd April 2025

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15460994>

Abstract: English is a language of knowledge, information, and employability. It is known as the lingua franca of the world and is widely spoken around the globe. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar rightly said, 'The person learning the English language can survive anywhere in the world. Today, in the world of globalisation, knowledge of English is essential for connecting with the rest of the world. English bridges the gap between information and knowledge and serves as a mode and medium of conversation among people. Teaching and learning are the most crucial activities in higher education between teachers and students. While learning in the classroom, students should be well aware of the English language. It serves as a means of communication. While learning in school, students should learn the language effectively, focusing on its four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Anyone who wants to learn the language must have a good command of these four basic skills. Writing is one of the essential skills among them, used for academic and professional purposes; however, it is often one of the most neglected skills in the classroom. This research paper is the outcome of a minor research project sanctioned by Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University, Nanded. It focuses on the challenges faced by English UG learners, highlighting the significance of writing skills and areas for improvement for both learners and teachers in teaching and learning writing skills. Writing skills can only be perfected through extensive reading and actual practice.

Keywords: lingua franca; globalisation; conversation; LSRW; academic; professional; teaching-learning

Introduction

The English language is the lingua franca of the world. It is spoken worldwide to get knowledge and information from the world. It is also known as a language of communication. It has its entity that is available in all forms, without knowledge of any language; we cannot communicate or send messages from one person to another. It helps people to share or exchange their ideas, thoughts, feelings, emotions and gather information. It is the most prestigious gift to human beings. It is crucial to quote Edward Sapir from Ph. D. thesis of Ghousia Nisar, who said, 'Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires through voluntarily produced symbols'. Language has a particular system of sounds, words, and patterns, and it is a body of language that allows us to understand and communicate in simple words. It gives a platform to access information and enables effective communication between people from different sectors and professions. It performs a crucial role in controlling people's emotional needs and social development. Language creates literature with diverse cultures and transmits to connect our social relationships in society.

For teaching and learning the English language, the teacher and learner should have a good command of the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, often referred to as LSRW skills. Students need these skills for effective communication.

1. *Listening*: Listening is the ability to understand spoken language. It helps to understand the key information and intention of the concerned speaker and develop the thinking process before speaking and writing.
2. *Speaking*: Speaking is the ability to express oneself by conveying one's ideas and thoughts. If a person is a good reader, then he/she will present his/her ideas and thoughts very clearly and accurately before the audience through oral communication.
3. *Reading*: Reading is the most essential skill of language. As Francis Bacon rightly said in his essay, *Of Studies*, "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man." Reading is the ability to comprehend the written text of a particular author with their socio-political, cultural, religious, and traditional customs of that specific society. The reader learns the author's intention through their literary works or books.
4. *Writing*: Writing is the ability to express oneself. It organises thoughts, constructs sentences, and uses appropriate grammar and vocabulary. The writing is used for academic and professional purposes. It can be developed through extensive reading and applied practice in writing. It follows certain traits like ideas, organisation, voice, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions in writing.

These four basic skills are fundamental and interdependent. They are shown in the following figure:

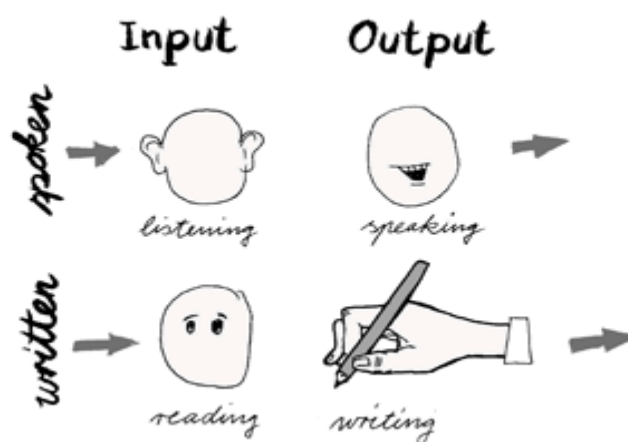


Figure 1: Four Basic Fundamental Skills of Language

While learning the above skills in the English classroom, the learners encounter challenges acquiring these fundamental language skills. The learner can manage a little with the first three language skills: listening, speaking and reading. But they have a special, negligible attitude towards writing skills. These skills are called 'Micro' skills. Apart from these fundamental skills, there are also micro skills, which can involve grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and punctuation marks. The teachers are also not making any special efforts to improve their writing skills. Writing is the most neglected skill in the English classroom. Teachers teach writing skills only from an examination point of view, not to make them proficient. The learners learn writing skills in school for writing answers to examinations, without developing additional writing skills.

Writing uses symbols, letters, alphabets, tenses, word classes, and punctuation marks to communicate thoughts and ideas in a readable format effectively. Writing is the most complicated skill among the four basic skills of language. It represents a graphic representation of speech, but the development and thought process are structured. It is the productive skills in the written form. It is worthwhile to quote Chakrakodi from the PhD thesis of Ghousia Nisar:

As said in the book *Learn English Teach English* by Ravinarayan, "To write clearly, it is essential to understand the basic system of a language. This includes knowledge of grammar, punctuation and sentence structure and higher order skills such as generating ideas, organising and organising information, and communicating meaning clearly and coherently" (Chakrakodi 106).

To write effectively, English learners must understand the basic system of language. They should have knowledge of grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, coherence, and cohesion in writing. Language has three basic components: sound, structure, and vocabulary.

Process of Writing:

Writing is a process that involves words, sentences, and paragraphs. It can be divided into three stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting.

Prewriting is the initial stage of writing in which the writer collects basic information by reading books, research articles, and Ph.d. theses, watching videos on YouTube, searching materials on AI, taking notes, gathering information from intellectuals in the concerned subject, and accumulating innovative thoughts and views relevant to their writing. After this, the writer makes their outline of writing. This writing draft is the author's rough draft that will be refined in their actual writing process.

Writing: In the second stage, the author makes their first draft of whatever they are writing. They concentrate very minutely and carefully on the skeleton of their writing, such as the proper beginning, middle, and end, coherence and cohesion, logical linking, spelling, appropriate use of tense, syntax and semantics, appropriate use of word classes, and punctuation marks. The writer does not follow certain writing traits, such as ideas, organisation, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions of writing.

Rewriting: In rewriting, the writer is very conscious of little mistakes and small and large matters. He is cautious about the spelling of words, the use of words in an appropriate context, the use of punctuation marks, the structure of sentences, the meaning of sentences, the use of word classes, coherence and cohesion, etc. The writer again went through their written script and found some errors they had not noticed earlier. In this stage, the writer's writing draft will be more refined and accurate than in the earlier two phases of writing.

Basic Principles of Writing:

It is quoted from Vivienne Maddock's Ph.D. thesis that M. Ravichandran defines four basic principles for developing writing skills, such as understanding, contextualisation, speaking, reading and writing. Firstly, one needs to impart the knowledge of the subject matter and ensure that one uses the most effective teaching methods so that students retain what they learn. Moreover, students can write well only when the spoken element has been mastered. Secondly, the context of the subject matter must be provided, which must be real and practical and which the students can easily relate to from their own experience. Thirdly, in addition to teaching correct grammar structures, teaching the appropriate natural speech every day is equally essential because day-to-day communication will invariably use the common structures and 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. The evaluation of students in writing, which may be understood as the assessment or grading of pupils' work, a measurement of their progress and writing, primarily depends on three factors:

- A. The variety, the dialect and the style of English
- b. Knowledge of syntax, phonology and semantics
- c. Skill in decoding sentences

These are some of the most essential elements that help learners in their writing skills.

Heys: Cognitive Functions of Writing:

Heys (2002) looks at writing as a more cognitive process involving three cognitive functions: interpretation, reflection and drafting. Writing is not an independent skill that depends on reading skills. A good reader can write well. According to Hey, the first part of writing is interpretation, which involves understanding a text to which the writer is exposed before actual writing. Reflection is the formation of new ideas based on what already exists. The final function is drafting or text production, where the new ideas are converted into words and symbols and put on paper.

Challenges before the learners of writing in English:

Language is a fundamental part of human beings. Inborn, we receive the quality of speaking through the use of language. It is a medium of communication between the sender and the receiver. Through language, people can effectively express their ideas, emotions, thoughts and so on to others. Language indicates the different cultural identities of a linguistic community and individual personalities. Each language has its own culture and customs, conventions and traditions, which differ from language to language. A cultural gap may be much wider between the languages of different families. It is aptly quoted from the Ph.D. thesis of M. Ravichandran to Klein Wolfgang, who said, "Language is a medium through which the child acquires the cultural, moral, religious, and other values of society". Language plays a crucial role in maintaining social relationships among the people of society. There is an urge to learn English to communicate with people from other linguistic areas. The constant need to learn English as a Lingua Franca of the world. It is used in trade, commerce, higher education in different fields, diplomatic missions, and military campaigns- all these need to learn English for effective communication. The basic objective to learn the English language is to get a good command of the basic skills of the language. In our classroom, these skills are not taught to learners of the English language. Among these language skills, writing is the least neglected skill in our classroom. The teacher teaches their students writing skills only so they can write answers in examinations. Learners' writing is only exam-oriented and not for developing all-inclusive writing among the learners of English.

While learning writing skills, the learner comes across different obstacles, and due to these hindrances, they cannot develop their writing skills. Now, here are some of the challenges/problems before the learners of English in learning writing skills:

1. The fundamental problem in learning the English language is mastery of the sound systems, i.e., understanding the mechanism of speech sounds and pronunciation, hearing the distinctive sound features, and approximating their production.
2. The second problem is grasping the structure of language, which is the arrangement of words in sentences in writing. The students are not well aware of the syntax and semantics of language, so they cannot compose a structure correctly and accurately in writing. One should be very careful in writing and use the structure of sentences with proper use of all conventions in language.

3. The third problem is learning vocabulary. It is apt to quote Shashi Tharoor: "Read widely, write regularly, and speak without fear. Words are your best friends—treat them well, and they'll never let you down" (online). Rich vocabulary allows writers to express their ideas more clearly and accurately and helps to reduce ambiguity and misinterpretation in writing. Selecting the right words ensures the correct message is conveyed exactly as intended.
4. Spelling Errors: The spelling of English words is often confusing and complex for learners of English. The most common spelling errors occur when the learner has developed a distaste towards spelling. Secondly, one is not careful about the order of letters in a given word. Lastly, the learner is poor in spelling because they fail to consult a dictionary when required. For correct spelling, the writer should be a conscious reader first.
5. Homonym Words: The fifth problem is homonym words in writing. A homonym is a word with the same pronunciation as another but with different spellings and meanings. These homonyms go in pairs and cause many errors and confusion in writing to unwary writers. For example;

He willingly *excepted* my invitation.

He willingly *accepted* my invitation.

In writing, the learner should be well aware of homonym words, which help to avoid using incorrect words instead of correct ones.

6. Sequential Lapses: Sequence means succession or continuity in writing a sentence or paragraph. It is the key principle in writing, according to which one sentence follows another within a long sentence. English learners commit many errors because of sequential lapses in speaking and writing.
7. Subject-Verb Agreement: The seventh problem is when the verb disagrees with the subject in writing. The verb agrees with its subject in person and number (singular/plural), a grammatical principle known as subject-verb agreement that ensures that the verb in a phrase corresponds to the subject in person and number. Singular subject takes a singular verb, whereas a plural subject comes with a plural verb. Errors creep in when verbs disagree with their subjects. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the subject and determine its number (singular/plural).

For example: Some of us **is** not satisfied. (Incorrect)

Some of us **are** not satisfied. (Correct)

In the above sentences, the first sentence shows that the verb does not agree with its subject in person and number, whereas the second sentence reveals that the verb agrees with its subject in person and number. English learners are not well aware of subject-verb agreement in writing.

8. Inappropriate Use of Auxiliary Verb: The eighth problem is the auxiliary verb amiss in writing. An auxiliary verb is a helping verb that helps form tenses, moods, or

voices from other verbs. Some auxiliary verbs, like will, shall, may, ought, etc., are confusing. Students must be well aware of their current writing skills.

9. Use of Adverbs: The ninth problem is the wrong use of adverbs in writing. Adverbs often confuse English learners because they fail to distinguish them from adjectives. Adverb errors occur when adverbs are misused- this can affect clarity, tone, or meaning. Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs to give more detail about how, when, where, or to what extent something happens. The writing shows some misuse of adverbs. For instance, using an adjective instead of an adverb ('beautiful' instead of 'beautifully') changes the meaning and weakens the sentence structure. Additionally, placing adverbs incorrectly or overusing them can make the writing feel cluttered. Consider revising for correct adverb form and placement, as well as improving clarity and writing style.
10. The tenth problem is making errors in the use of adjectives. Adjectives are an open word class that tells us about the exceptional quality of other words or nouns in writing. The learners should be well aware of the difference between adverbs and adjectives.
11. Judicious Use of Gender: Judicious use of genders is another problem for English learners in writing. The learner should know two prominent genders: masculine and feminine. Many mistakes in speaking and writing are made when one fails to make judicious use of these two genders. The learners know little about the two other genders, like Neuter and Common.
12. Proper Use of Pronouns: Students of English are puzzled about using appropriate pronouns in writing. Pronouns are words used instead of nouns. Thus, they play a vital role as substitutes for nouns in writing. They can be used as subjects, objects, and possessives. There is a lot of confusion among students about the use of pronouns.
13. Proper Use of Preposition: Preposition is a key element in writing, also known as a closed word class. A preposition shows the relation in which the person or thing is denoted to its object, standing to something else. There are two types of prepositions: simple and complex prepositions. The learners should be well aware of these types of prepositions in writing.
14. Aware of Tricky Participles: A participle is a verbal word having the qualities of both a verb and an adjective. The participle combines both the nature of a verb and an adjective. Present participles end with 'ing' and Past participles end with 'en', 'd', 'ed', 't', 'n' or 'en'. The biggest issue is *dangling participles*- when the participial phrase does not modify the noun it is supposed to, often leading to absurd or ambiguous meanings. While using appropriate participles, the learner should check the subject and ensure the participle modifies the correct noun. Then read aloud- does the sentence sound weird or create a mental image that does not make sense? The learner should be specific; do not let the participle float without a clear connection.
15. Idiomatic Inaccuracy: The learners of English do not take special care when using idioms. They are often wrongly used because they are not well aware of and

appropriately understood in their forms and meanings. The learner should properly use idioms in formal and academic writing. While writing, the learner should avoid mixing two idioms that create confusion and unintentional humour. Understanding the correct meaning and context of an idiom before including it is essential to maintain coherence and credibility in your writing.

16. Use of Conjunctions: Conjunctions are used as connectors in the sentence. Conjunctions like- and, but, because, so...as, not only...but also, or, either...or, neither...nor, though, although, as soon as, that, etc. These connections are used to join words and sentences together. We can make our speech and writing compact and precise using these connectors. Conjunctions and prepositions are similar in their function, but their basic difference is that a conjunction connects words or sentences into a unit. In contrast, a preposition shows a relation of a noun or pronoun with another word. Similarly, a conjunction joins two elements in the sentence and does not have any other function. Students of English are not well aware of the usage of conjunctions in writing.
17. Inappropriate Use of Articles: There are two types of articles- definite and indefinite. *A* and *an* are indefinite articles. A is used before a word begins with a consonant or sounds like a consonant. An is used before words beginning with a vowel or words starting with consonants but sound like a vowel, for example, honest-an honest. This definite article is used for singular and plural forms of all genders. Learners of the English language are often confused about how to use appropriate articles when speaking and writing. Students should be well aware of articles while writing and speaking. Articles are used for non-specific, singular nouns, while 'the' is a definite article for specific nouns. Misusing or omitting articles can confuse the reader or make the sentence awkward. Review your sentences to ensure proper article usage based on the noun's specificity and countability.
18. Letter Writing Lapses: The lapses observed in letter writing can be attributed to a lack of familiarity with the formal letter structures and conventions. Learners of college degrees often struggle with appropriate salutations, complimentary closings, and maintaining a formal tone, especially when transitioning from casual to formal writing. Additionally, grammatical issues such as incorrect use of articles, improper sentence structure, or informal language may arise due to limited practice or insufficient understanding of formal writing norms. These errors sometimes stem from first-language interference, where the writer's native language rules influence English usage. Time constraints or inadequate proofreading may also contribute to missing crucial elements like the subject line, date, or proper content organisation. Addressing these lapses requires focused instruction on letter formats, consistent practice, and careful review to ensure clarity, correctness, and appropriateness of tone. Errors in letter writing may cause misinterpretation and misunderstanding. The learner should be cautious of these errors in letter writing.
19. Compound Complications: The learners should carefully study and use compound words in writing. There are noticeable complications with the use of compound

words in your writing. Compound words, whether open (e.g., "post office"), hyphenated (e.g., "mother-in-law"), or closed (e.g., "notebook"), can often confuse if not used or written correctly. Incorrect spacing, missing hyphens, or unnecessarily combining words can affect your sentences' meaning and readability. It's vital to double-check compound words, especially those that change meaning depending on how they're written (e.g., "blackbird" vs. "black bird"). Consistent and correct use of compound words enhances clarity and flow in writing.

20. Omission of Punctuation Marks: The omission of punctuation marks in writing affects the sentences' clarity, flow, and meaning. Punctuation marks like commas, semicolons, full stops, apostrophes, capitalisation, exclamatory marks, and question marks are essential for organising ideas and guiding the reader through the writer's thoughts. Without proper punctuation, sentences can become run-on, ambiguous, or difficult to understand. The students should review their writings carefully to ensure punctuation is correctly placed, as it plays a crucial role in conveying the intended message and tone.
21. Phrasal and Proverbial Errors: The writing contains several phrasal and proverbial errors. Phrasal verbs are often misused or contain incorrect particles, changing the intended meaning. Additionally, proverbs are either misquoted or applied out of context, reducing the clarity and impact of the message. Careful attention to proper usage will enhance the coherence and accuracy of the writing. Therefore, learners have to be very careful about their meaning and spelling in writing.
22. Coherence and Cohesion in Writing: English learners can understand the coherence and cohesion in writing. *Coherence* refers to how logically ideas are organised and connected in writing so the reader can easily follow the writer's thoughts. *Cohesion* is about the *grammatical and lexical linking* within a text to make it flow smoothly- this includes conjunctions, pronouns, repeated words, synonyms, and transition words. While writing, the students do not consider coherence and cohesion; ideas jump randomly without logical flow, topic changes with no explanation, lack a clear thesis or main argument, and include unrelated examples or off-topic information. It indicates poor coherence in writing. However, a lack of linking words (therefore, moreover), repetitive sentence structures, and the inadequate use of pronouns leading to confusion and abrupt sentence connections show poor cohesion in writing.
23. Tense Errors: The learners should be very cautious while writing in English. Tense errors occur when verb tenses are used inconsistently or incorrectly, confusing the timeline of actions or events in a sentence or paragraph. Tense inconsistencies are noticeable in the writing. It is essential to maintain the same tense when describing events happening in the same time frame and to adjust verb tenses appropriately based on present, past and future time references. Consistent tense use will improve the clarity and readability of the text.

Conclusion:

This research paper is based on writing skills that highlight degree students encountering specific challenges in developing practical writing skills. The learners of English come across limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, poor organisation of ideas, lack of coherence and cohesion, tense errors, omission of punctuation marks, improper use of adverbs, adjectives, prepositions, conjunctions, and difficulties in expressing critical thinking. These challenges are often compounded by an insufficient exposure to academic writing practices, inadequate teacher feedback, and limited motivation or confidence among the learners.

These challenges and issues require a multifaceted approach, including targeted writing instruction, consistent practice, and constructive feedback mechanisms on writing from teachers. Higher Educational Institutions must prioritise writing skill development as essential to academic success and professional readiness. By fostering a supportive learning environment, offering writing workshops, and integrating writing-focused tasks across disciplines, universities can better equip students to overcome these challenges and enhance their academic writing proficiency.

Ultimately, improving writing skills is a continuous process that demands attention from both students and teachers. Teachers should teach writing skills by conducting activity-based writing activities in the classroom. Therefore, students can develop their writing skills through these innovative activities. Strengthening these skills will benefit students academically and prepare them for effective communication in their future careers. Writing skills can be perfected through extensive reading and actual practice.

Funding: This research paper is a product of a Minor Research Project sanctioned to Dr. R. S. Gore under the Minor Research Project Scheme of SRTM University, Nanded in A.Y. 2023-24.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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