The transitioning Phase of India and Ontological Challenges in Academic Writing.

Dr. S. Shravan Kumar

Assistant Professor, Rajiv Gandhi University of Knowledge Technologies, Basara.

ABSTRACT:

With high scope for a swell in the promotion and acceptance of English Language Studies in the context of contemporary India, there can be expected reversals in the demand on various fronts. The changing face and phase of India may limit the supply to need satisfaction of the learners. Necessity of supply for the demand of ELS may be a see-saw. If the entire nation has only English as the medium of instruction owing to the contemporary trend, the need for ELS may slide, as the first language English learners may no more require teachers in abundance for specific English Training, and there may be a limitation to an extent in teaching English Language as a subject, rather having literature in institutes of advanced or higher education. This transitioning phase, with the augmentation of technology, has also brought in Online Education System. With respect to the English Language Learning, the Online Education System has nullified writing in the universities and institutions. This was observed in RGUKT (Rajiv Gandhi University of Knowledge technologies). The learners hardly write in the class because of the availability of video lectures they are provided with to listen to, and the reading material of the video lectures as a back-up. They took online close ended tests for a major portion of 60 marks, limiting their writing to only 40 percent and that too only in the examinations. Lack of writing practice in a formal academic way was evident, leading to poor writing display. Though this system of having close ended online examinations has been revived to paper based subjective writing to an extent of 70 to 80 percent; there lacked improvement. Since writing can be seen as a major construct in the development of various aspects of language learning, awareness raising strategies for ontological challenges is the need of the hour to improve the academic writing ability, and to develop learner autonomy which in turn promises to endear brighter prospects of

employability in a globally competitive world. The aim of this paper is to unearth the ontological challenges in Academic Writing with the advent of online education system in the transitioning phase of India.

INTRODUCTION:

With a very high population and with literacy rate increasing, the scope for English Language Studies in contemporary (the transitioning phase of) India is very high at all levels (primary, secondary, tertiary, etc.,) of the education system. Though English was introduced with the intrusion of the British in India, it was the English Education Act of 1835 that first promoted the mode of instruction to be in English. And after independence, it was the Tara Chand Committee (1948) that recommended compulsory teaching of English at the secondary level. Today, we see a flourish of Model Schools run by the Government, with English as the medium of instruction rather than the regional medium. In addition, globalization and cut-throat competition has raised the demand for digital classrooms. These advances and transitions have triggered and encouraged the ingression of online education system, which in turn seems to go for online close-ended or objective mode of exams for comfort and transparency. Rajiv Gandhi University of Knowledge Technologies is one such University with the privilege of being the first of its kind in India to establish itself (with online education system), facilitating students with audio and video lectures at all points of time. This seemed to be taking for a liking, until it was noticed that, this has reduced the scope of writing in the classroom (taking or making notes), and the learners pitiable academic writing performance, both in the exams and in the classroom. This gave rise to a few questions on the nature of Academic Writing and its existence, and its relationship with its other competent skills (Listening, Speaking and Reading). Hence, there was a need felt to unearth the ontological challenges in Academic Writing.

Research Question:

1. What are the ontological challenges in Academic Writing that have been unearthed with the advent of online education system in the transitioning phase of India?

Review of Literature:

The focus on the main research question has also afforded on exploring how to identify and unearth the ontological challenges in a set up of online education system. The ontological challenges in Academic Writing have been brought to light through some of the existing studies (quoted directly in the review of literature) and the action research, which was entailed with a few tools and techniques.

It was already a known fact that the Academic Writing of the learners was weak, exclusive of the effect of online education system in the transitioning phase of India, through some studies.

Chokwe (2011) and Pineteh (2012) clearly stated that it was "Lack of practice in writing" that pushed the learners behind, from doing well in Academic Writing. They revealed that it was because of the teachers providing the learners only with theoretical part of writing and went on to suggest that writing in the classroom was needed for the learners to improve their writing ability.

In addition to this, Javed & Umer (2014) went on to say that "the learners have limited opportunities to practice writing in target language (apart from their mother tongue), outside the classroom", resulting in the learners weak academic writing performance.

In the classroom too, Dudu et al., (2012) stated that "it is unrealistic to expect the lecturers (untrained in most cases) to remedy the problems which the learners bring to a university/classroom in a short period of time".

In the transition phase of India, with the inclusion of the effect of online education system or the awareness or access to online writing, studies of Pineteh (2012) and Williams (2008) reveal how Academic Writing performance of the learners has dipped. They affirmed that "the increasing access to the writing genre of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Short Messaging Services (SMS) and Blogging, has impacted the quality of the students writing as they unconsciously transfer the instant messaging style to academic writing".

With the emphasis on Challenges in Academic Writing in the transitioning phase of India where online education system is fast catching up, choosing to explore in the engineering classroom of RGUKT seemed an appropriate option to add some literature to the above mentioned studies.

Research Methodology:

Action research was carried on at Rajiv Gandhi University of Knowledge Technologies (Basara campus) to unearth and identify the ontological challenges in Academic Writing of the ESL learners of engineering, most of whom have come from a regional medium background. There were informal talks with the learners and teachers of RGUKT on **what** prevented the learners from writing anything, **why** they have not been good at writing and **how** they would improve or fare better in writing in English. In addition, classrooms of the teachers teaching English to the first year students of engineering were observed, to uncover the happenings of Academic Writing in an English class.

Comprehension and Conclusion:

Failing to consider some of the critical issues like language instruction controversy and death of languages, India has been moving ahead; and this is being witnessed in the transitioning phase of India where online education system has caught up with the digital world (internet). But with this, going Meta seems to be a distant thought, as readymade material is available online and plagiarism has made it easy for the learners to just copy and paste things. This was evident when the learners were given assignments and they have just put down what was available on the internet. There was no creative thinking or academic writing involved and the learners revealed that it was the pressure of too much writing and too many subjects. Also, during the informal talks it was revealed that online objective mode exams have become very mechanical and boring as they just take the exams for the sake of taking because copying has become easy that way.

During the action research, it was also noticed that the learners show least interest in coming to classes as they have the liberty to sit and study at any point of time as they have the video and audio lectures online. In addition, they have the reading material of the same video lecture. From this it was

comprehended and noticed the minimal writing scope of the learners in relation to the maximum use of listening and decent reading. It was also observed that the appreciation of the use of SMS language has resulted it's usage in Academic Writing contexts, further degrading their academic writing capabilities. Trying to exploit the internet for be purposes, when asked to use synonymous words, it was observed during the action research that they were using words out of the context which made no meaning or gave a wrong meaning to the sentence. It was also noticed that the writing of the learners became more and more short and informal, the main cause as revealed by the learners being Whatsapp and Facebook, the two online applications (social media) which students have been using on a daily basis.

During the classroom observation it was noticed that a few teachers had the problem in controlling the students from browsing the internet, opening their laptops. The large classes gave less scope for the teacher to give a writing task. Even if a writing task was given in the class, the teacher had less time in going around checking the writings of all the seventy students. There was no feedback given in most cases. Though it was given in some cases, it was limited only to a few students and not all. Giving feedback via a projector screen was thought to be a good idea, but it was again noticed during the action research that the individual learner was not willing to be focused.

It was also noticed that most of the teachers were not trained and they themselves did not have enough exposure to academic writing. Having audio and video lectures readily available to the students also made it easy for the teachers called facilitators to be in their comfort zones and this also resulted in not liking to answer any question posed by the student. This is when it was observed that the learner autonomy was spelling doom for the learners as they were just copying and pasting anything they liked from online than looking at its validity and authenticity.

Though there are limitations to this study, it can be concluded that with the advent of online education system there are ontological challenges in Academic Writing which is clearly evident in this transitioning phase of India. Though, several debates are possible on this, it can be suggested that addressing these challenges using several strategies may help the learners improve their academic writing ability.

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