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RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Empirical Study on the Writing Skills of Engineering Students and some Remedial Measures to Hone their Writing Skills.

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Abstract

A person is accepted as a competent user of a language if he is proficient in all the four skills of the language – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Though speaking fluently in English is widely recognized as a yardstick to measure a person's language ability, writing skills are not left far behind. Writing is an integral part of human communication. Documentation has become a much required tool in all sectors; hence, writing has gained increased significance in this context. The medium may be electronic but writing has become a very powerful medium of communication. We use written communication more regularly now than ever before. Text messages, social media posts, e-mails, blog entries and comments are all modes of communication that typically rely entirely on written words.

With this increased demand for written communication, improving the writing skills in English has acquired great significance. Students learning English as a second language have to be conscious of the nuances of English to write effectively. The habit of reading in general plays a vital role in acclimatizing one with the English language which in turn helps him think and express himself in correct English. Enriching one's stock of vocabulary, gaining knowledge of English grammar and spelling are imperative for better written communication. Practising to write short passages helps the writer gain confidence to use the special features of English like similes, metaphors, idioms and phrases that make the text natural and effective.

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Introduction:-

Writing is a conscious art as it is the best way of expressing one's ideas, feelings and thoughts. As written passages become documents for the present and future generations to utilize, they are expected to be error free. They gain the status of reference material once they are printed or digitalised. English, the link language of the present world, has its own nuances to be learnt by its users. Being proficient in writing in English enhances an individual's performance in his exams, official communications, project presentations, etc. Furthermore, his professional stature would gain a boost with effective written skills. In today's work culture, no matter which field we are in, writing plays an important role. Engineers, especially, whether they work in MNCs or in any other company require good written skills to communicate with their clients, (India and abroad) with their superiors, colleagues and so on.

Role of Reading in Improving Writing Skills:-

The habit of reading plays a vital role in picking up the nuances of writing better in English. Reading stories, novels, plays, articles, essays, newspaper reports, etc makes the reader acquaint with the variety of methods used in writing. The continuous observation of sentences, vocabulary and their contextual use gets deeper into the mind and in the course of time the reading speed increases proportionately. "The power of observation, at first consciously cultivated, will very soon become instinctive and unconscious, and in the more important moments of living will operate without being aware of it"(Kathleen Betterton). This habit makes the reader think in English which is essential for writing in English. Moreover, the different ways of expressing one's ideas can be explored and the

various patterns of sentences read are embedded in the thought process which finds expression in writing.

Vocabulary Enrichment:-

Having a rich vocabulary stock helps the writer express his ideas, feelings and thoughts appropriately. Reading on various subjects makes the reader understand the choice of vocabulary required in different contexts. It is very essential for the writer to know the inflexions of words, i.e. the ways of making more words from the parent word. The meaning and usage of these inflexions make him write without mistakes.

Eg: LIFE				
life	-	Noun	-	The rescue workers saved her life .
live	-	verb	-	He lives in Chennai.
live	-	adj	-	It is a live telecast.
lively	-	adv	-	The program was lively
liveable-	adj	-	-	This is a liveable house
livelihood-	-	noun	-	They sell fish for their livelihood

In addition, the knowledge of compound words made using the main word would make them richer. Eg : life force life cycle live action livelihood live in

The knowledge of making abstract nouns from adjectives, e.g. **Long – length**; from verb, e.g. **Laugh – laughter**; from common nouns e.g. **Infant – infancy** would make the writer understand the difference in usage and the connotation. The comprehension of the work done by the parts of speech facilitates the reader convey his ideas explicitly without ambiguity.

Here the role of referring to standard dictionaries must be emphasized. Dictionaries are the best companions of those who learn English as a foreign language. Dictionaries provide varied information on every word and its use in sentences. One could learn the spelling (British and American), pronunciation, origin, parts of speech, different meanings, their contextual use in sentences, compound words and idioms and phrases made from them, etc. In addition, dictionaries offer guidelines to understand the grammar of English language, special vocabularies, and exceptions from the general rules and so on. And the thesauruses equip them with appropriate vocabulary throwing more light on the contextual use of various synonyms and antonyms of words.

Grammar Rules in Writing:-

Misconceived rules of grammar bring in loss of cohesion and unity of thought resulting in miscomprehension of the passage. "Grammar is basically the rules that make language work" (Terry O' Brien). One of the major mistakes made by those who learn English as second language is with tenses. Mistakes made in tenses disfigure the sentences and miscommunication is the result. Due to lack of knowledge in the use of tenses, mistakes continue to occur in the use of voice, direct and indirect speech, degrees of comparison, simple, complex and compound sentences. And so, comprehension of the verb patterns of the twelve tenses and their usage is essential for effective written communication. Similarly, the writer should check whether verbs agree with the subject in the sentences. There are three major causes of error in subject / verb agreement.

- 1) Mistaking a singular subject for plural and vice versa.
E.g. Her spectacles are / is costly
- 2) Failing to identify the main subject and making the verb agree with an apparent subject.
E.g. 1. Each of the students have / has won a prize
- 3) The captain with his teammates have / has reached the ground.
- 4) Treating the same subject as singular in one place and plural in another. The committee has agreed on the issues

The committee were divided in their opinions.

The importance of spelling:-

Spelling is the life force of a word. Wrong spelling kills the word and the quality of the passage written is seriously marred and obstructs the reading and understanding. The learner of English should remember that Indian languages have specific alphabets to denote the sounds of the language. For example, Tamil language contains 247 letters whereas English has only 26. The habit of substituting letters for the pronunciation of words cannot always be of help in English. It is because there are many exceptions in English to the general rule of **letters for**

Sounds in pronunciation of words. And so the writer has to read the spelling and record it as a picture, in other words, photograph it in his mind's eye to avoid spelling errors.

Many English words have silent letters which are never pronounced.

Word	Phonetic Transcription	Pronunciation	Silent Letter
Listen	lɪsn̩	Lisen	t
Walk	wɑ:k	Wak	l
Debt	det	Det	b
Bridge	brɪdʒ	Bridg	e
Psychology	saɪkə:lədʒi	Sycology	p
Handkerchief	hæŋkətʃəf	Hankerchif	d
Island	aɪlənd	Iland	s
Form	fɔ:rm	fam	r
High	hai	Hie	g
Colonel	kɜ:n	Kanel	lo

There are also words with vast difference between their spelling and pronunciation.

Spelling	Pronunciation	Phonetic Transcription
Rendezvous	rondiʋ	rɑ:ndrɪvʊ:
Restaurant	restuhrawnt	restərə:nt
Entrepreneur	ontruhprenyur	ɑ:ntreɪprənə:
Bourgeois	bozwa	bɜ:ʒwɑ:
Chassis	shasee	tʃæsi
Tomb	toom	tu:m
Pizza	peetza	pi:tsə
Demon	deemon	di:mən
Extempore	extempuree	ekstempəri
Wednesday	wenzday	wenzdeɪ

Another exception which confuses the second language learner is the similar sounds denoted by some letters like **C** and **K** and **Ch** and **K**.

However, **C** and **Ch** maintain their unique pronunciation in many other words.

C pronounced like /c/	C pronounced like /k/
Cell	Call
Centre	Canvas
Censor	Cave
Cent	Caution

Ch pronounced like /ts/ or /s/	Ch pronounced like /k/
Chief	Chloride
Chiffon	Chromium
Chip	Chorus
Chocolate	Choir
Church	Cholesterol
In the same way „th’ is pronounced as /θ/ and /s/ in various words	
Th pronounced as /θ/	Th pronounced as /s/
Theory	Brother
Thermal	Gather
Thrust	Mother
Both	Then
Earth	Rather

The marked difference in British and American spelling also causes confusion as most of the present day learners of

English rely on spellcheckers in the computer which recognises American spelling as right and British spelling as wrong.

Eg:-

<u>British</u>	<u>American</u>
Colour	Color
Honour	Honor
Centre	Center
Dialogue	Dialog
Programme	Program
Realise	Realize
Favourite	Favorite
Traveller	Traveler
Jewellery	Jewelry
Cosy	cozy

These examples prove the point that English spelling and pronunciation are unique and they have to be learnt carefully by observation and practice.

The knowledge of homophones would be of great use not only to avoid spelling errors but also to improve the vocabulary stock. There are so many words where the change of a single letter results in entirely different meanings as in

Stationery, stationary, Principal, principle, Ordinance, ordnance.

In some other words, parts of speech of the words become different when a letter is changed as in advice (n), advise(v)

practice (n), practise (v)

Nowadays there is a tendency to rely on spellcheckers in computer which makes the work easier but eventually people become dependent on electronic gadgets rather than their own knowledge. It is better to know the spelling of words than to be dependent because sometimes some errors go undetected.

Some Suggestions to Kick start the Writing Process:-

It would be ideal for a person to start with object description. Making simple sentences describing an object / picture / scene on its colour, size, shape, usefulness and other material facts help the writer gain confidence. After writing a few descriptive sentences, the writer could very well improve it by adding suitable adjectives, conjunctions and linkers. Practising to write descriptions paves way for expressing one's thoughts in English in his/her own style. In such contexts appropriate use of similes, metaphors and analogies make the written matter effective and interesting. In order to make the writing more appealing and less ambiguous, active voice could be used whereas passive voice is best suited for official and business writing.

Good writing is like developing leadership skills where one has to take conscious efforts to be good at it. "The writing and setting out of essential information in a way that gives a cooperative, motivated person a good chance of understanding the document at first reading, and in the same sense that the writer meant it to be understood"(Martin Cutts). One has to follow certain steps to make his/her writing appealing and meaningful. Choosing the topic, organizing the ideas, and fixing the approximate length of the passage are the first steps. Writing the first draft is the next step. Revising the first draft and correcting the grammatical and semantic errors is the third step. Avoiding repetitions and fine tuning the passage with appropriate vocabulary, linkers and conjunctions is to be followed next. During the course of writing one should be conscious to avoid ambiguous sentences, repetitive ideas and the use of high sounding words. Writing is a creative work and one should ensure variety and clarity in the sentences which make reading effortless and enjoyable.

Conclusion:-

Writing reflects one's thinking process and the level of comprehension. Practising to record the thoughts and ideas following the guidelines discussed in this article would help the beginner to improve his writing skills. Experience gained over a period of time guides the writer to avoid the mistakes and improve his / her style of writing. Continuing to write kindles the habit of reading which in turn complements writing. Here every one should

remember the six wise men of Rudyard Kipling – what, why, when, how, where and who as they always guide us to reach our goal. Writing skills play a larger part in the professional life and good writing skills can help a person to be more credible, and more capable. Digital technology has made some cherished form of communication like letter writing, almost obsolete, but paradoxically the emphasis on writing skills has become all the more important now than ever.

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