A WRITING TEACHER: REAL TIME CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract:—

This study is an analysis of the various factors, other than the methodology used by teachers of tertiary level education, which challenge the effective teaching of technical writing. Experience of many teachers of Technical Writing, show that apart from the methodology followed in teaching, there are other factors that hinder the progress in imparting the writing skill in students. Some of them are the differences in psychology of the students, the constraints in technical institutions, an ineffective curriculum that needs to be suitably changed, and a high student population that adversely affects the student-teacher ratio. At times, it becomes inevitable for the teachers to compromise on pedagogical tools because of the constraints found in these aspects. The study facilitated the researcher in attaining an in-depth understanding of how writing can be taught successfully when teachers and students work hand-in-hand and also guided by an effective curriculum. This study also brought to light the changes that have to be hurriedly brought in by the administrators/educationists of the colleges, to make the environment conducive for the teaching of English Language and Technical Writing subjects.

Key words – Technical writing, change in curriculum, teaching methodology

I. INTRODUCTION

The students of technical college tend to concentrate more on the technical subjects than English, even though English is used as a medium of education and for other academic purposes. Similarly, many students give importance to securing higher grades in the technical subjects and tend to give less importance to subjects like English Language or Technical Writing. In India, this thought stems right from the admissions in the Higher Secondary School, when primarily the scores obtained on the core subjects are used for eligibility. Many students do not realize that acquiring proficiency in English Language and Technical Writing skills may not be possible in just a few days of preparation before the examination, though that might help to pass the examination.

II. STUDENTS AND THEIR OUTLOOK

It has to be borne in mind that the students in tertiary level of education are at the last lap of adolescence and at the threshold of adulthood. So, their psychology is complex and continuously changing due to various factors such as their family background, the impact created by teachers and elders and above all, the peer pressure. These vary in degrees to individual students' surroundings. Producing an interesting and comprehendible written expression is an overpowering task for many of them, especially the students with learning disabilities. These students need additional support and guidance from their teachers and peers to learn to produce quality writing. Kathleen Louise Bell says "even successful writers enter college with ambivalent and sometimes hostile attitudes toward writing."[1]Attention of these students need to be drawn to the fact that the prospective employers are wary of such deficiency in technical writing skills. It is quite important to make the students realize that how they communicate is equally important, if not more, as what you communicate. Understandably, this is easier said than done. And when some teachers of Technical Writing stress on the importance of the subject, many students mistakenly perceive that as a conflict of interest, as the teachers may be obliged to talk in favour of their vocation and convince the students.

III. RECENT TREND INCURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Information technology buoyed by the all-pervading internet has fuelled 'change' everywhere. Scholars stand on the shoulders of the giants and try to explore unknown horizons. Teaching cannot be kept away from the bandwagon of 'change'. Normally, the syllabus is changed every five years. But due to the current gallop of knowledge explosion, on account of the extensive use of information technology in every field of study, the curriculum tends to become obsolete within a year or two.

However the universities do not change them frequently due to many systemic constraints. For example, by the time the curriculum is formulated, approved by the committees and sent for printing, the language or technology may have undergone a change. To make the problem worse, the teachers of Technical Writing are apportioned relatively less amount of time when compared to teachers of other core technical subjects, to complete their syllabus. And the teachers of technical writing do not have the much needed time to talk about it elaborately within the time given to them to complete the syllabus. This forces even the most committed teacher of Technical Writing, armed with the best pedagogical tool, to rush through the syllabus, instead of letting the students develop the taste and appreciation for English Language and Technical Writing skills.

In many colleges, as there are no lab examinations for English Language or Technical Writing, as part of the college curriculum, it is understandable that students do not lay enough emphasis on the application of English Language and Technical Writing skills. While some students have real passion for learning, others feel compelled to study only to secure a job and make a living out of it. The teachers of technical writing at the tertiary level of education have to deal with this challenge efficiently by helping students realize the advantage for the students in gaining proficiency in the English Language and Technical Writing skills.

IV.   NEED FOR A CHANGE

We live in a time of 'change' in every sphere of life around the globe – be it social, political, scientific, technological or communication oriented .A new subject on Technical Writing should be added to the curriculum at the earliest, so that the students lay more emphasis on the application of English Language, thereby gaining mastery in Technical Writing skills. Lab sessions should also be included as part of the curriculum, for the teaching of the English language and Technical Writing skills. The lab sessions would encourage the students to learn how to use the language effectively for communication – a traditional teaching methodology may not be able to achieve this objective. Technical Writing subject would introduce the students to the nuances of writing.

This new subject on Technical Writing would equip the students with the 'how' of communication, when the many other technical subjects teach the 'what' of communication. And, 'how' to communicate is equally important, if not more, as what you communicate. As the world is moving towards forums and self-help documentation for the resolution of issues and support for products, adding a subject on Technical Writing to the curriculum, would equip the students with skills necessary for the Industry. Coming to the specifics of curriculum for teaching technical writing, there stands a formidable wall of Jericho. Technical Universities vie with each other to turn out students with high grades. So, they allot more time for teaching technical subjects, leaving the barest minimum for language studies. It is time that the curriculum is tweaked to the extent possible to accommodate teaching technical writing in the college studies so that more students become employable on graduation and also help them to perform their job efficiently with greater ease.

The number of periods allocated to the teaching of English Language and Technical Writing subjects should be made on par, with other technical subjects. This step would also stress the importance of these subjects in the minds of students. This would allow the teachers sufficient amount of time to motivate and impart the English Language and the Technical Writing skills by using a wide range of pedagogical tools. This would also allow time for the teachers to adopt different strategies/tools for different categories of students.

V.   STUDENT TEACHER RATIO

Right from Kindergarten up to the Higher Secondary Schools, we find the student teacher ratio is maintained by dividing the class into several sections. However, in technical institutions, the entire sanctioned strength of students for a particular branch of study is accommodated in one class. In reputed universities and colleges, the student population is far beyond the optimum class size. This makes the class unwieldy and the slow learners often find it very difficult to cope up with the pressures and tend to give up. The teacher is unable to bestow special attention and care on the weaklings in a highly populated class. Due to the above constraints, it becomes inevitable for the teachers to compromise on the use of the appropriate pedagogical tools.

The traced problems does have probable solutions too. Talking about better interaction with the students, the best solution would be to copy the practice followed in schools to have number of sections commensurate to the student population to maintain an optimum student

teacher ratio. This may be fine-tuned to the best advantage of the average learners. The sections may be split up depending upon the students' background or learning ability based on the options exercised by each student. The element of background may depend either on geography– urban, semi urban or rural areas or other factors such as first graduate in the family and students from vernacular stream.

The next best workable solutions would be to invite one or two campus recruiters at the beginning of the first semester – may be during the welcome programmes – to give a talk to the students about the need to acquire Technical Writing skills to be employable on graduation. This would go a long way in altering the psychological bias of the students and bring in a welcome change in the students' attitude towards technical writing classes, right from the beginning of the tertiary level of education. It is also the need of the hour for the colleges to give equal importance – more so in terms of the time apportioned – to the teaching of English Language and Technical Writing subjects. In addition, academicians and educationists need to put their head together to explore the possibility of considering language proficiency as one of the credits in technical education.

VI. INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL FACTORS

On top of all the above challenges, the challenge posed by the influence of social factors needs special focus. Teachers of Technical Writing at the tertiary level education notice myriad deficiencies in writing fuelled by the ubiquitous social networking – incorrect grammar, wrong spelling and faulty composition to name a few. This real time challenge needs to be addressed more nimbly because it is a sensitive matter to be handled with utmost care and caution. No other creature under the sun is gifted with writing skills as the humans and over a period of time, changes occurred in every language.

The title of an article published in the electronic media recently, would convey the crux of the matter and the effect of the sweeping changes taking place in the conveyance of thought in writing. The title reads as: - "Iz Teknology Ruinin English Language". The reports suggested that Net-speak is now showing up in schoolwork and formal writing. It debated whether these textese and cyber-slang killing the English language, or are we all just making a mountain of a molehill? It is not a new phenomenon. But the speed in which it spreads encompassing the whole world is astounding. The

teachers of English Language are perplexed and are in the cross roads wondering which way to go – either to resist or to reject or 'go with the flow' or 'sail against the wind'. The plight of the teachers of Technical Writing is more onerous in this critical situation. This is because technical writing is intended to cater to the needs of the vast majority of the people of different strata. [2]
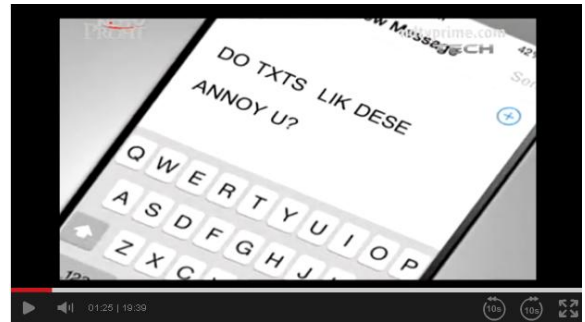

Picture – 1 Example of today's net-speak English[3]

The real time challenge today is to cope up with the net-speak, abbreviations and slang widely prevalent among the student community. The students find them comfortable, time-saving and stylish to use them in their daily interaction with their friends and acquaintances. Almost the entire student community has abandoned the conventional mode of writing and switched over to the style used for texting using these new words and phrases. An example is reproduced for greater appreciation of the problems at hand.

"My summer holidays were complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girlfriend and their 3 screaming kids face to face. I love New York, it is a great place." is written as

"My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4, we used 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF &thr3:-kids FTF. ILNY, it's a gr8 plc."[4]
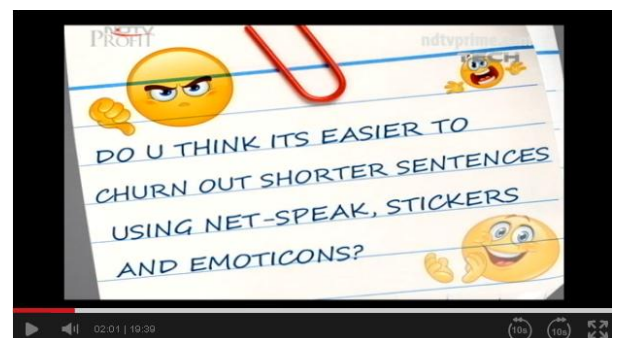
Picture – 2 Example of today's English for technology [5]

It is true that more than the teachers or the general public at large, the students are caught up in the web of social networking with huge peer pressure to use the lingos like internet slangs, texting abbreviations, emoticons and emojis. But the moot point is whether the time is ripe for the teachers of Technical Writing to jump into the bandwagon?

Jennifer Chambers Claxton, a Technical College teacher, has narrated her predicament in the following words. "I was genuinely confused about how to best teach writing in the setting of the technical college. Knowing that writing in standardized English, or academic English, involves a sophisticated understanding of a complex and unnatural grammatical system that is often at odds with the students' lived experiences, I marvelled at the capacity that technical college writing students, or any writers, have to express understanding within an arbitrary grammatical system." [6]

The solution lies in understanding the past. If we look at the history of the languages, changes in written language have taken shape only after it percolated from the scholars to the general public. For example, the first ever English translation of the New Testament from the original tongue, namely Tyndale New Testament, was finished in 1526. A sample verse from 1 Corinthians 13:13 is reproduced below: -

"Now abidethfayth hope and love even these thre: but the chefe of these is love." [7]

in the year 1611, that is nearly a century later, the same verse was translated into the Elizabethan English language, which is widely known as the 'Authorized King James Version'(KJV) goes like this

"And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."[8]

In 1979, in the New King James Version of the New Testament, the same verse is rendered as

"And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love." [9]

In the above examples, changes in grammar, spelling and composition were brought into the formal written language only after a century or more from one version to the next one. Therefore, it is quite important to

wait a sufficiently long time to include the current lingos in mainstream teaching.

The above viewpoint is supported by Joseph M. Williams who has mentioned that by the end of the sixteenth century, there had developed a form of early modern English that constituted the basis of our modern standard English. He quoted extracts from George Puttenham's 'The Arte of English Poesy, 1589 to convey that the written language should be natural, pure and the most usual of all the country. [10]

A different viewpoint is presented in an articleby Philip Vassallo. "These are exciting times for writers and writing teachers—that is, if we're open to change. Remarkably, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has published a report urging writing instructors to develop new strategies in harmony with web-based technologies. . . . Today, digital technologies, assembled under the term "Web 2.0." have created the next great wave. Web 2.0, whose definition remains arguable, refers to the pervasiveness of websites like Google, Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, which have irrevocably altered communication . . . we communicators have to deal with this new reality". [11]

VII. CONCLUSION

Teachers and a section of the inquisitive students are aware of the latest developments in the areas of their interest. In reality the language teachers do not find much time to introduce or discuss these developments in the classroom, as they are in a constant rush to cover the rather rigid syllabus. This exposes the students to the risk of losing out on the much needed knowledge on the present trends in language and technology. So the teachers should try to steal a couple of minutes, in their relatively less apportioned time, to introduce such developments in the class. Thereby, the class of students may at least be aware of such developments, though not fully master it.

Technical Writingseeks a demanding responsibility as it is done for a specific audience. Hence it is not written based on the writers' erudite scholarship but considering the understanding capabilities of the target audience or readers. Till the internet and IT lingos are familiar among the general public, the teacher of the Technical Writing has to necessarily wait for the changes

in English language writing to percolate in the everyday conversation. Till then, the chaste English grammar, spelling and composition need to be taught to achieve the objective of Technical Writing. However, this does not mean that the teaching should be a water tight compartment, not to allow any trace of the current developments in the language. To ensure that, the students need to be taught about the developments, but at the same time, they are advised to desist from using such slangs in their writing, so long as the right time arrives.

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