

# A CASE STUDY OF UNIVERSITY-LEVEL STUDENTS' REQUIREMENTS FOR ENGLISH WRITING EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*This thesis reports on a case study concerning Indian student's needs for English writing instruction at Gujarat University. Through survey and interviews, the study investigates the English writing instruction the subjects had received, their needs for English writing and expectation of English writing instruction. Moreover, the research examines the current situations in the writing instruction at the university analyzing the gaps between the students' need and the instructors' real practice. The results of the study indicate that the students need to learn some practical writing such as emails, CVs or statement of purposes and so on. They wish to improve sentence-level skills such as finding appropriate English expressions and developing ideas and wish the instructors focus on these in class accordingly. Besides, the students expect the instructors focus on word choice, content and organization instead of grammar issues. By comparing the students' survey and interviews with the instructors' interviews, it is suggested that the gap between the students' needs and the real practice is not very serious. Possible explanations for the research results are discussed and implications for teaching are offered.*

## HISTORY

In the last fifty years or so, grammar's place in the curriculum has been debated and detested. Some teachers still accept grammar as the central method of language instruction, while others see it as a waste of time. In public and private K-12 schools, grammar instruction often persists in Traditional Grammar pedagogy. In the university, some instructors espouse the need to further in still their students with grammar, often going so far as to say that "students didn't get enough in high school." On the other hand, just as many instructors argue that grammar instruction is useless. In spite of this polemic, grammar's value within pedagogy is not the matter at hand. Instead, I want to look at grammar instruction as it is taught, or should I say, *when* it is taught. It needs to be understood from the start that in spite of all the research on the problems of grammar instruction, grammar is still being taught—for various reasons. What is needed, then, is a new approach.

If grammar is going to be taught, it needs to be maximally effective. It is hypothesized by some (myself included) that grammar instruction is more effective when rooted in the framework provided by Cognitive Grammar than when based on Traditional Grammar. Indeed, this is the hypothesis underlying the research carried out in the process of

constructing this thesis. The research reported here examines two experiments that deal with teaching grammar to college students. In particular, the experiments are a part of an investigation into the effectiveness of applying Cognitive Linguistics (CL) and Cognitive Grammar (CG) to L1 language pedagogy. In order to gauge the effectiveness of the CL/CG approach adopted here, comparisons are made with Traditional Grammar instruction. The experiments reported here tested two grammatical features: the count/mass distinction and the perfective aspect/tense. These two focus areas were used because they both belong to the larger theory of boundedness in CL and CG. Boundedness refers to whether or not an entity or process (noun or verb, for example) has inherent boundaries.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

English is so extensively used in many parts of the world (India included) that English instruction in general has become more intensively studied and various teaching pedagogies are being experimented with at various levels of schools. In 2002, the Indian Ministry of Education announced that English would become a required course starting from third grade (Liu & Braine, 2005). In most curriculums in India, English writing is not a course but a part of comprehensive English courses which mostly cover listening, speaking, reading, writing and even translating. English instruction has mostly focused on grammar instruction and translation of Indian sentences into English expressions, and writing skills have been ignored to some extent.

The turning point came in the year of 1989 when English writing became a required part of the university entrance exam (You, 2005) and hence began to be emphasized more in secondary schools. Now that the entrance exam to colleges is almost the only criterion for the admission to universities, any skills that will be tested in this exam will be practiced and studied intensively. Therefore, English writing started to be taken more seriously ever since then.

At the university level, all Indian undergraduates are required to take English courses (Liu & Braine, 2005). College students have diversified needs for English writing. They may need to write English emails to their friends who are native English speakers; they need to publish academic papers in English, write business letters, create CVs, when hunting for jobs or write the statement of purpose when applying for universities in English-speaking countries. However, despite the fact that English writing instruction becomes increasingly important and highly demanded, Indian students' English writing proficiency is tremendously inadequate.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

With the ever-increasing demand for better English-language writing proficiency when students pursue further study in overseas institutes and hunt for a job in the highly competitive job market in India, English writing instruction in India has been studied more intensively and has undergone significant changes. Though English is a required course

starting from the early stage of schooling in India, writing has been ignored to some extent. It was only when writing became a part of the university entrance exam in 1989 (You, 2005) that it was taught seriously at various levels of schools. More and more studies have been devoted to the improvement of writing instruction and teachers have started experimenting new approaches in classrooms in India.

However, although instructors in India make every effort to improve teaching approaches, there still seems to be a gap between what teachers teach and the students' real needs for writing instruction. For example, some students need or want more instruction on practical writing but the instruction only focuses on academic writing such as persuasive or descriptive writing. The students may need more feedback on content and organization, but the instruction focuses more on grammar explanation, word choice, and so on. Given that few studies are concerned with the current writing instruction and the students' real needs at tertiary-level institutes in India, I attempt to conduct a case study at a university about the what students' real needs for writing instruction are and how the instructors teach writing in their classes. Finally, the research intends to find out what the students' expectations for English writing instruction are and how college-level pedagogies can be adjusted to better satisfy their real-life demands.

## FINDINGS

This study aims to investigate three research questions: 1) What are the students' real needs for English writing instruction at Gujarat University? 2) What are the real situations in the current writing instruction at Gujarat University? 3) How can the writing instruction be adjusted to satisfy the students' needs? I will report the answers of the first two research questions in this section and discuss the third question in the section of implications for teaching. Before reporting the students' needs for English writing instruction, I will also report the background information concerning the writing instruction the students had received, which may conduce to the understanding of their current needs. In this part, no instructor interviews are involved. Then, I will present the students' needs for writing instruction from the aspects of 1) the students' needs for English writing and the problems in writing and 2) the students' expectations for writing instruction.

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