Development of the Writing Skill in English as a Second Language of Rural Formees of the Roman Catholic Church in Sri Lanka

A.C.D' Rosairo; Dr. C.D.H.M. Premaratna

Department of Linguistics University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

altheadr@gmail.com; dissanayake@kln.ac.lk

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ABSTRACT

Language is for communication. It is in the spoken and written form. Today, the main streams of education in Sri Lanka are Sinhala and Tamil with English as the second language. In reality, many adolescents and adults struggle to acquire the English language. This was not so at a time when the medium of primary education was English. The acquisition of the second language is even a greater toil to the youth who aspire to commit themselves to service in the Roman Catholic Church in Sri Lanka as Priests and Nuns. The aim of this research is to develop the writing skill of rural priests and religious formees in Sri Lanka. Data were collected to determine the level of the English writing skill with special focus on the use of verb forms, tenses, and modal verbs. The findings indicated formators and rectorors had identified that the level of competency in the language was poor at the beginning. At the end of the programme, it had reached a satisfactory level. The level of competency in the language was not satisfactory at the beginning of the programme, and even when the programme was going on; yet it reached its peak at the end of the programme. The main factors identified were the lack of exposure and the lack of facilities in receiving a foundation. The easiest skill identified by the research-sampling group was the

reading while the formators/rectors and teachers identified speaking. All acknowledged writing as the most difficult skill.

Keywords: Primary education; Second Language, second language acquisition; Writing skill; language competency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today a great challenge the Church of Sri Lanka faces is the acquisition of English as a second language and the improvement of its standard in those who enter priesthood, and religious life. Undoubtedly, it is a greater challenge to those who come from the rural areas of the country. They not only need skills in the language but also ought to be at a level where they are able effectively to transmit their knowledge in the second language and communicate their message. The formation masters/mistresses/rectors at several levels of both priestly and religious formation are well aware of the difficulties of the formees in the English writing skill. Hence, this research was done to investigate into the causes of this situation and to design an apt methodology to help the rural formees gain proficiency in the writing skill with fewer or no mistakes in the use of verbs.

This is the bench mark that is needed for all those in formation to finally become competent in speaking and writing, to communicate flawlessly in English. This is no easy task. This is the difficulty that is faced by their teachers, in improving the writing skill. (Dassanayake, 2015) Thus, the task is not only the acquisition of the English language but also the imparting of knowledge in the local context. Dassanayake is aware of the challenge of developing the writing skill in the second language. Would it not be much more challenging to develop the writing skill in the second language in rural students who are below average? The criteria is brought out in a book of guidelines for formation of one particular congregation as “The pre-novitiate must introduce them to the charism of the Society of Jesus and its apostolates, ensure the candidates’ proficiency in the medium of instruction for formation and adequacy in English.”(Jesuit Conference of South Asia, 1998) This clearly positions the need and the level of language competence that is required from those in initial formation.

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This research aimed at exploring how one could help young men and women, aspiring to join Priesthood and Religious life, to acquire a second language and master it, not only for academic purposes but also as a medium of living and serving in ministry. It will also assist those who have been educated in Sinhala and Tamil to work in an environment where English is the medium of communication. This will guide and help teachers to find a proper methodology in teaching English as a 2nd language to adults from rural areas.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing is both the act and the result of the act (Archibald Alasdair, 1988) Writing is the union of skills and is a form of communication that allows

students to put their feelings and ideas on paper. This takes place when one requires organizing ones knowledge and beliefs into convincing arguments, and conveying meaning through well-constructed text. In its most advanced form, written expression can be as vivid as a work of art. Children learn the steps of writing, and as they build new skills upon old; writing evolves from the first simple sentences to elaborate stories and essays. Spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and organization come together and grow together to help the student demonstrate more advanced writing skills each year. (Sartre, 2017) Reading skill supports the writing skill and they can be learnt simultaneously as they are related to each other (Axelsson, Lundqvist and Sandberg, 2019). Writing can’t be looked at as an isolated skill as there are many skills interrelated to this (Deane, 2010). Writing is complex and it requires the right grammar, spelling and also the formatting (Weigle, 2005). Yet, there are many barriers to it. The main barriers to learning, such as poverty and limited resources, still prevail hence, it is seen that the necessary English language skills, can become another barrier to learning (Omidire, Funke, Ebersöhn, Liesel, Leask, Marisa, Konza, Deslea, du Plessis, Anna-Barbara, 2018).

This issue of want of English language skills becoming a barrier to learning is not only a challenge that is faced by rural students of the South African states; it is a common obstacle among the students of Sri Lanka as well. There are many contributing factors for one to acquire a language. The educational background as well as a supportive environment always plays a major role (Ouellette-Schramm, 2016). The lack of exposure and fewer opportunities to produce the language is another hindrance for the acquisition (Verosha Kalani, 2014). Motivation as well as resources are two factors which are internal as well as external that is a great need (Wimaladharma, 2015). The unavailability or late arrival of books and teachers and the lack of

innovative teaching methods are other aspects found in rural areas. This brings out the reality that at the end of the school period students are unable to construct a simple sentence, as they have developed a negative attitude towards the language too (Wijekoon, 2015). Yet, those who choose to commit themselves to the service of the church need English for their national as well as international ministry (Mahawattage, 2016).

Even the material from the teacher to the students must be syllabus appropriate so that the students could absorb the language to communicate by using the target language (English) (Alemi, 2016). In this manner the writing skill is far better supported and developed with the help of the teacher. This gives the learner the opportunity to produce his or her own piece of writing too. (Nusrat, 2016) Guided writing is another method that is used to teach students and help them in their writing skill. "The 'guided' in guided writing lessons, then, refers to the essential nature of the support provided by expert teachers while students write" (Gibson, 2008:234). In Guided Writing, the teacher works with the whole class or a small group of students who have similar needs and actively prompts, coaches and guides them as they write a composition." (Nusrat, 2016)

The linguistic skills will demand the right use of lexical, syntactic, semantic and alphabetical symbols. However, the advantages of teaching ESAP genre awareness go from grammatical issues to even identity theories. Students will not only obtain better marks but they will be learning and reflecting upon attitude awareness, target-reader needs, etc., which would improve their L2 writing practice."(Munoz-Luna, 2015) This speaks of having a grammatical awareness. For one to have a grammatical awareness one needs a sound knowledge and understanding of the impact of grammar in writing. Not only can one write grammatically, but also identify and correct mistakes if one has a sound grammatical understanding.

Moreover, this needs knowledge, understanding as well as usage. One needs to take into consideration how the writing ability is defined in the classroom as the basis should be the development and the use of the language. "As for the ways to set it up, the definition of writing ability can be formed depending on the teachers' own experience. It can be also defined according to their ideology on writing. Ideology means here teacher's philosophy on the nature of writing."(Jyi-yeon Yi, 2009)

The writing skill is highly complex. Therefore, "Due to these complexities in writing most of the ESL learners are not adequately proficient to write either academically or professionally. It is generally seen that in spite of having English as a medium of instruction and even after years of exposure to English in schools, ESL learners are unable to develop a required level of competence in writing English in general and AMU in particular."(Nusrat, 2016). It has been debated for some time as to whether the teaching of grammar helped young people learn to write well. One concern that has arisen is if the teaching of grammar – the syntax was effective or not for one to become competent in writing. However, studies and reviews have not been sufficiently comprehensive to answer the question of effectiveness conclusively. (Andrews, Beverton and Low, 2005) With such thinking in the background, a research has been conducted in the UK to study the evidence of teaching grammar with a view of developing the language skills. "In terms of practice, a very practical implication of the results of the present review is that it would be helpful if the future development of teaching materials and approaches included recognition of the effectiveness of sentence combining. There needs to be a review of the overall effectiveness of present materials designed to help young people to write; not all the practical suggestions put forward will be effective, and the

emphasis on knowledge about language and language awareness, although useful and interesting in itself, may not be helping students to improve their writing skills.” (Andrews, Beverton and Low, 2005)

Even after 11 to 13 continuous years of learning English, these learners’ proficiency level is not satisfactory and they have not yet mastered the basic grammar. (Wee, Sim and Jusoff, 2010) Undoubtedly this is almost the same reality of rural children in Sri Lanka when it comes to the standard of the English language. They too learn English in their schools for at least 10 to 12 years and still find themselves struggling to handle verb forms in the right manner.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted on a sample of fifty formees – twenty-five young women and twenty-five young men between the ages of twenty and thirty. They come from eleven administrative districts of Sri Lanka with different social backgrounds. Qualitative data was collected through questionnaires, pre-tests, worksheets after the lessons, post-tests and a delay test on verb forms, tenses and modals. Their formation programme has to be complemented with additional language lessons. The formees can express their thoughts verbally to some extent yet; they do not speak complete grammatical sentences with precise words and accurate verbs. Therefore, they are not as successful in writing. Today many houses of religious formation of the Sri Lankan Catholic Church do not have a well proven methodology to instill the English writing skill in their formees. Hence, at the end of this research religious formation houses hopefully could have a methodology and syllabus to help their formees use verbs in the right context.

In order to understand the writing skill of formees a simple random sampling method was used to select the controlled group coming from rural areas. It was

chosen from three places, twenty five young men from the Intermediate Seminary in Palathota, Kalutara, seven young women from the Holy Angels’ Novitiate in Kurukulawa and eighteen from the Holy Angels’ Juniorate in Nagoda, Kalutara. The Intermediate Seminary was chosen as it houses the seminarians from all the Dioceses (the country is divided into 13 dioceses) of the Roman Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. This is a stage that comes between the minor and the major seminaries where young men are trained and formed to become priests. The Candidacy, Postulancy, Novitiate and Juniorate are places where young women are trained and formed to become religious nuns in the Church. Of these places a Novitiate and Juniorate was chosen. The Holy Angels’ Congregation was chosen as it comprises only local membership. It supplies missionaries to Australia and Kenya.

The research was also limited to the analysis of the mistakes made in the use of tenses, verb forms and modals in written communication. The primary data was collected through a data survey collecting method.

There was a need to study the background of the controlled group. Hence, a questionnaire with predefined answer options and open-ended questions was given. This was done as there was a need to understand the preferences, behaviour, and feelings of the controlled group besides the basic information. This concerned the background of the participants as well as the exposure they have had to English. A feedback questionnaire was also given in order to ascertain the improvement they had made. Besides the questionnaires given to the formees, there was also one prepared for formators, rectors and language teachers of the houses of formation selected at random. This covered predefined answer options and open-ended questions.

The writing skill had to be introduced to and

systematically developed in the formees. Therefore, they had lessons conducted with handouts as support material. The lessons consisted of each verb form in all three tenses as well as on primary and modal auxiliaries. Free writing and guided writing methods were applied during the course of the grammar lessons within a period of about ten months. The formees had lessons once a week according to the guided teaching method. When students had arrived at a basic or intermediate language level, the teacher guided them through a structured lesson in a way that they understood all the elements and processes in writing tasks or activities. At the end of every lesson a work sheet consisting of the relevant grammar component was given. It carried mixed sentences of positives, negatives as well as interrogatives. Some carried the base form of the verb and some no verb for gap filling while some to paraphrase. The indirect feedback strategy method was applied in the correction of the work sheets. The learners were provided a comment about the nature of each of the errors they had made as an abbreviated label at its location.

The teaching of sentence combination is one of the many methods that is found effective in the teaching of grammar. This method was implemented at the end of the lessons. Writing sentences freely was done as a post assessment test where they were asked to construct 5 sentences each on each of the verb forms in every tense and modal auxiliaries. Once this was completed the participants were given, all the work sheets done by them along with the two pre-test papers and the post-test paper for feedback. They were given an opportunity to look at their mistakes and receive a feedback. Thereafter, the post-test was repeated to find out if there was some improvement. Three months after they had completed their programme they were given a Delay Test. This was a repeat of the post-test in order to observe the progress. All this procedure was carried out within twelve months.

5. DATA PRESENTATION

The improvement in understanding the verb forms were studied over a six step process. They were

1. the pre-test without verb clues
2. pre-test with verb clues
3. work sheets after the delivery of the lesson which was the immediate test
4. post-test
5. post-test after the feedback
6. the delay test

Prior to the lesson, two pre-tests were done. The first was without clues to the verbs and the second with. According to the pre-test without verbs and pre-test with verbs scores, it was observed that there was a fair improvement in the second instance when the clue to the verb was given compared to the first.

Table 1: Scores received at various tests on the simple present

Tests	percentage of right scores	percentage of incorrect scores	percentage of unattempt scores
PRE (W/O V)	62%	31%	6%
PRE (WV)	89%	11%	0%
LESSON (W/S)	73%	25%	2%
POST	84%	16%	0%
AFTER FB	94%	6%	0%
DELAY	98%	2%	0%

(PRE (W/O V):pre-test without verb clues, PRE (WV): pre-test with verb clues, LESSON (W/S):work sheets after the delivery of the lesson, POST: post-test, AFTER FB: post-test after the feedback , DELAY: the delay test)

Table 2: Scores received at various tests on the simple past

Tests	percentage of right scores	percentage of incorrect scores	percentage of unattempt scores
PRE (W/O V)	57%	29%	14%
PRE (WV)	87%	12%	1%
LESSON (W/S)	91%	9%	0%
POST	80%	20%	0%
AFTER FB	94%	6%	0%
DELAY	99%	1%	0%

Table 4: Scores received at various tests on the present progressive

Tests	percentage of right scores	percentage of incorrect scores	percentage of unattempt scores
PRE (W/O V)	16%	74%	10%
PRE (WV)	29%	70%	1%
LESSON (W/S)	92%	8%	0%
POST	85%	15%	0%
AFTER FB	93%	7%	0%
DELAY	99%	1%	0%

Table 3: Scores received at various tests on the simple future

Tests	percentage of right scores	percentage of incorrect scores	percentage of unattempt scores
PRE (W/O V)	52%	29%	19%
PRE (WV)	61%	31%	8%
LESSON (W/S)	92%	7%	1%
POST	75%	25%	0%
AFTER FB	92%	8%	0%
DELAY	99%	1%	0%

Table 5: Scores received at various tests on the past progressive

Tests	percentage of right scores	percentage of incorrect scores	percentage of unattempt scores
PRE (W/O V)	20%	51%	30%
PRE (WV)	31%	64%	5%
LESSON (W/S)	86%	14%	0%
POST	76%	24%	0%
AFTER FB	89%	11%	0%
DELAY	97%	3%	0%

Table 6: Scores received at various tests on the future progressive

Tests	percentage of right scores	percentage of incorrect scores	percentage of unattempt scores
PRE (W/O V)	9%	57%	34%
PRE (WV)	19%	68%	13%
LESSON (W/S)	81%	19%	0%
POST	78%	22%	0%
AFTER FB	88%	12%	0%
DELAY	98%	2%	0%

(See Tables 1 to 6, rows 1 and 2) The highest scores at the pre-tests were observed in the simple verb form sentences. The continuous form sentences came next with a significant drop.

The findings reveal that the work sheet scores at the end of each lesson were consistently higher than those of the post-tests. (See Tables 1 to 6 - 3rd and 4th rows) However, the simple present form work sheet score even after the lesson was the lowest. The simple past, simple future, present continuous work sheets carry a fairly high score. (See Tables 2, 3, 4 - 3rd rows)

The post-test solely contained construction of sentences and the formees were instructed to construct all possible forms. (See Tables 1 to 6 - 4th rows)

Correction was provided through the indirect feedback correction method. This option was chosen in order to highlight the errors and to allow the formees to construct their sentences freely. Upon feedback, the formees reattempted construction of sentences and a

remarkable improvement was noted. This is prominent when comparing the Post-test to the Post-test after feedback. (See Tables 1 to 6 – 4th and 5th rows)

A significant factor noted is that in all post-tests – the Post-test, Post-test after feedback and the Delay Test – the formees had attempted to construct all five sentences. In addition to this the Delay Test had a very high score of correct construction of sentences and the errors noted were mainly related to articles, spelling, conjunctions and prepositions and rarely to the tenses. This is clearly seen in the Delay Test. (See Tables 1 to 6 – 6th rows)

Table 7: A comparative analysis of the simple form in view of tenses

Tests	Tenses that received the lowest score at tests	Tenses that received the highest score at tests
PRE (W/O V)	FUTURE	PRESENT
PRE (WV)	FUTURE	PRESENT
LESSON (W/S)	PRESENT	FUTURE
POST	FUTURE	PRESENT
AFTER FB	FUTURE	PRESENT/PAST
DELAY	PRESENT	PAST/FUTURE

Table 7 brings out a comparison of the lowest and highest scores received at each stage of the tests. At four stages it has been the simple future that has been most challenging while the present at two stages.

Table 8: A comparative analysis of the progressive form in view of tenses

Tests	Tenses that received the lowest score at tests	Tenses that received the highest score at tests
PRE (W/O V)	FUTURE	PAST
PRE (WV)	FUTURE	PAST
LESSON (W/S)	PRESENT	FUTURE
POST	PAST	PRESENT
AFTER FB	PRESENT	FUTURE
DELAY	PRESENT	PAST

The past tense was a component that had been manageable by the research sampling group. However table 8 is of the progressives. Here the future has been problematic in two stages, the present in three stages and the past at one. Even though the present participle is the same for all tenses the auxiliary verb to match the subject verb agreement is one aspect that needed attention.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In language acquisition and development the reading and the writing skills take a very prominent place. These are considered to be very important factors both in school and later on in life. (Axelsson, Lundqvist and Sandberg, 2019) The lack of reading and the exposure to the usage of the language could be one reason why the rural formees are unable to write verb forms on their own. Another could be the lack of exposure they have had to the language at the initial stages. It is found that of the 50 of the target group 13 have not been able to pass the O/L (Ordinary Level) English

exam and 11 have ordinary passes. Only 16 have got credits. 28 have not been successful in the A/L (Advance Level) General English exam, 11 have passed 10 have received credits and 1 has not responded to the question asked. 35 out of the 50 have said that English was never a fascinating subject to them. With such data it is understood that the exposure that they have had to the language is so little that it has not made much of a contribution to the acquisition. This is further confirmed by the pre-tests scores. The pre-test without verb clues scoring a lesser mark than the one with the verb clue indicated that, the target group was unable to decide which verb to use. This could be due to insufficient vocabulary or exposure the formees have had to the language as to understand the meaning of the sentence and decide on the verb.

Some work sheets reflected high scores besides the simple present verb form. This could be due to the type of challenges presented such as gap filling and paraphrasing of positive, negative and the interrogative forms of sentences.

It is also observed that after the lessons were delivered, all the verb forms in the present tense carried high scores besides the simple form. This form has received the least scores. While all other forms are above 80%, this carries only 73%. (See Tables 1,2,3,4,5,6 -3rd rows) This could be due to the subject verb agreement in the positive sentences, while the negative and the interrogative took the do and does auxiliary verb forms.

The post-test was to give the freedom to construct sentences on their own with the verb forms. Here it was observed that many were able to get the right tense and verb form in sentences, yet made mistakes in prepositions, articles and spelling. One significant feature that was revealed with the post-test was that there wasn't any who did not attempt writing the

sentences. Whether the sentence was right or not the attempt was made to construct them. Another observation was that many of the sentences that were constructed were based on their daily life experience. This highlighted that the formees were comfortable to express themselves and had gained some confidence to word their thoughts.

Evans, Hartshorn and Allen Tuioti cite to Russell and Spada (2006), and state that in language learning the corrective feedback refers to any feedback provided to a learner from any source. (Evans, Hartshorn and Allen Tuioti, 2010) This method is what was followed at all houses of formation. It had been very effective not only in highlighting the mistakes the formees had made but also in enabling them to correct themselves. Careless mistakes, yet, had not been totally eradicated even at this point. That was because writing is a struggle for a large segment of the population, (Nusrat, 2016) and the formees were no exception to it.

In developing the language one needs to learn the idiomatic expressions. So, it is not only the vocabulary, grammar, word order and formation of letters, but also the style, the way one expresses ones thoughts and views that need development. If the writing is to be self-directed its requirements of the lexical, phonological, and semantical features need to develop. Today, it is still considered a very demanding activity, with many skills and English Academic Writing Strategies: Outlining, Drafting, Proofreading sub-skills behind. The process of writing which is complex has been progressively linked to external issues that can possibly have an influence on it. (Munoz-Luna, 2015)

To gain this component there needs to be enough exposure to the language. Therefore, the exposure and the opportunities the formees receive in their houses of formation could be considered, as a major contributing factor to develop the language, one being the resources

of reading material provided. The formators and the staff members speaking to them in English, the religious rites, services of worship and rituals being conducted in English and also entertainment that was provided such as listening to the radio and watching TV of the English channels were other factors. Correction on the spot was another major contributing factor in all skills, the speaking, reading as well as writing. It could be concluded that if one needs to gain fluency and competence in the language and develop the writing skill, one needs to be totally immersed in the language.

7. CONCLUSION

Writing is an important way of communicating. Be it in one's mother tongue or the second language one needs to be given the right guidance and support to acquire and develop it. Students must be able to word their thoughts and express themselves error free so that the right message is communicated. The results of this present study shed light on a few important aspects of the programme of formation. If one is to develop in the language one needs to be given the right environment and good resources to support. The guided teaching method where the student is provided with structured lessons is of much benefit.

Hence, all functional grammar components should be taught with practical applications. The indirect feedback correction method helped the L2 learners much to become aware and understand their own mistake while correcting it themselves. Therefore, this correction method could be continued for both the speaking and the writing skills. Hence, as these elements have helped understand the difficulties rural L2 learners face in the writing skill, the methodology tried out has also been very supportive.

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AUTHORS

First Author – A.C.D' Rosairo, BA (University of Jayawardanapura) MA (University of Kelaniya)

E mail address: altheadr@gmail.com

Second Author – Dr. C.D.H.M. Premaratna, PhD (Hitotsubashi, Japan), MA (Hitotsubashi, Japan), B.A. (University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka), Senior Lecturer, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.

E mail address: dissanayake@kln.ac.lk