

In Government Schools where is the Room to Write?¹

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Abstract

This article deals with writing, more specifically English writing, with regard to students studying in government schools. In these schools, classroom instruction is geared towards preparing students to write for the defining school leaving exam conducted by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) at the end of class XII. The overly centralized system does not give teachers much room to teach students about the diverse meaning writing can have in their lives. Since examinations favour strict adherence to the text with an over emphasis on accuracy, this does not encourage students to connect their writing with their lived experiences. The world of academic English found in school does not accommodate the variety of English that is found in the out-of-school contexts of government school students. In fact, teachers themselves see their writing lives as being quite separate from their role as teachers of writing.

Key words: Writing, ELT, School, Instruction, Examination.

In a system that allows teachers little autonomy to choose what to teach and how to teach it, it is often a schizophrenic experience being a language teacher while also being a literacy researcher, because in the current context there is no meeting ground between the two. The reading² I have been doing as part of my research has opened my eyes to what the possibilities of teaching language and literacy are – what the experience of writing and reading can be, what students can do given the opportunity, and in fact are doing in their lives independently, in their out of school literacy practices, which include reading and writing in English on mobile devices – including reading instructions for video games, reading and writing messages and social media posts and reading on the Internet, filling forms, reading magazines, newspapers and, albeit for rare individuals, books. However, as a language teacher, the reality of transactions in the classroom and the inflexibility of the system that lives and swears by the examination system and the board results weighs heavily on my daily routine, and leaves

me with little choice but to conform to its demands.

This article draws from my experience as an English teacher at the secondary and senior secondary level in a government school in Delhi. In this article, I would like to share some ideas and formulations that have emerged out of my interactions with my students, both within and outside the classroom. I will briefly describe their beliefs, attitudes and practices of writing, especially in English. These are specific to the students I teach and the school I teach in, and of course to who I am as a teacher. I believe this micro view from the grassroots may be useful in gaining insights into some of the issues around writing that have been discussed in the context of teaching and learning how to read. Through this article, I will attempt to add to the conversation around the possibilities for meaningful language and literacy teaching in the classroom that could be created even within the highly regimented and inflexible system that exists in government schools in Delhi, as we

strive to help our students become independent and confident writers.

Writing is a key part of school for all students. Walk into any secondary or senior secondary classroom when students are supposed to be studying by themselves, and you will find a large number of students engaged in writing. Ask them what they are doing and they will respond, “*Kaam poora kar rahein hain*” (We are completing our work). A closer scrutiny of what the students are doing will most often reveal that they are copying notes or answers from a guide or a help-book, or from other students’ notebooks. Great store is set on having answers and notes, and everything copied neatly into notebooks on time. For the teacher, this also adds to the ease of the correction process. Teachers do not need to read anything, they merely have to tick everything and write, “seen”. Teachers also constantly ask the students “*kaam poora hai?*” which in actual terms means: “Have you copied all the required notes and written answers to all the assigned questions?”

As a teacher of English at the senior secondary level in a Delhi Government school, I spend several hours each day assessing and grading the students’ writing, and helping them prepare for the Class 12 board examinations. As I read through the answer scripts of one test after another, I am often struck by the thought that this is probably when my students write the most during the entire academic year. In fact, the first time I saw my students engaged in sustained writing was during their first term examination in September 2017, when they wrote continuously for three hours. The three-hour examinations were held again in December 2017 and January 2018, and for a select few (“weak”) students in February 2018. In the secondary classes, and especially in Class 12, the education system does not leave much time, space or demand for independent and original writing. There isn’t much time for reading widely either, but that is another story. There isn’t much

time for doing anything more than just “covering the syllabus”, which translates into reading the textbooks and writing answers to assigned questions in the books or to the kind that will be asked in the examination. In fact, as a teacher, I find that I am mostly “assigning” writing to my students rather than “teaching” them how to write.

Most writing done by Senior Secondary students is part of the mandated curriculum of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), the examining body. This writing is in the form of formulaic letters, speeches, articles or debates on topics selected by a teacher or by the person who sets the examination paper, with no consideration for the learners or the purpose of the examination. The completed assignments are evaluated on the basis of how accurately they can quote the words of the lesson in the textbook, or the extract given for the unseen passage. The teachers’ feedback is also most often limited to correcting mistakes in grammar, spellings and usage of words, or to add “value points”/information from the text that is missing in the answer. Examiners on their part dole out marks liberally when the assignments meet the required evaluation guidelines given in the CBSE marking scheme. At this point, it would be instructive to quote an extract from the marking scheme for the March 2017 Senior School Certificate Examination, available on the CBSE website:

13. If a student literally lifts a portion of the given passage / extract from the question paper as an answer to a question, no mark(s) to be deducted on this count as long as it is relevant and indicative of the desired understanding on the part of the student [reference questions under Q1, Q2 and Q8].

When writing is mostly associated with testing and at almost all times evaluated in an examination-like context, and this seems to be the dominant purpose of writing in government

schools, is it any wonder that students are reluctant writers?

In addition to this, there are some more factors that hamper government school students from writing independently. Many of the writing assignments given to them deal with topics they either do not understand, or do not have a first-hand experience of. For example, never having attended a seminar, or been on excursions and tours, they do not know what to write about them. They struggle to develop thoughts and ideas for such topics as they are unable to relate the topic to their own lived experience.

Even when they do have exposure or experience related to a writing assignment, they do not draw from it as they have never been encouraged to connect their lives, their lived experience and their innate knowledge with the assigned writing tasks. Further, in my experience the teaching/learning experience in government schools does not encourage them to draw on their point of view. For instance, when “eve-teasing” is given as a topic for writing, students struggle to understand what “eve-teasing” means. Even if an empathetic teacher or a kind invigilator explains it to them, they struggle to connect it with the harassment faced by most girls as they negotiate their everyday lives. They end up writing the most formulaic stuff based on model answers from guidebooks and instructions from teachers. This happens because students have been taught to write for the purpose of evaluation, as the average government schoolteacher also focuses on getting students to generate written material that fits within a prescribed range of expected responses to this assignment or question.

In my classes, I encourage my students to write independently. In fact, when a new class is assigned to me, I ask the students why they do not incorporate their viewpoint in their writing. I assume that they would have developed a viewpoint from participating in or listening to

conversations at home, with their friends or in the neighbourhood, or from reading about incidents in the newspapers or hearing about them on the television and news. Apologetically, they reply that they are not good writers because they do not have adequate vocabulary, and their grammar is weak.

It is clear that writing has always been positioned to them as something they do in response to the questions given to them, with the main focus being on producing accurate and error free writing. They hesitate to move away from formulaic ideas that are available in guidebooks as these are easier to express in error free language; and they deliberately relinquish more interesting ideas because they do not have the linguistic resources to express them.

Writing in English therefore produces great anxiety. Even smart, bright and intelligent students, who have many ideas and strong opinions when expressed in spoken Hindi, withdraw into a shell when it comes to writing in English. It is as though English demands different kinds of thought processes and ideas from the ones they possess. It is almost as if they have to take on a different persona to write in English, because their natural thought process is not appropriate for English. Student after student has said to me: “I don’t know what to write.” When I ask them to express their thoughts in Hindi, there is an outpouring of ideas and experiences. When I say: “Why don’t you write this in English?” they look puzzled. Their expression seems to convey: “Really? We can say the same thing in English?” For my students, English assumes this mysterious, mystical, superior status. Hence, they have little or no confidence when it comes to writing independently in English.

However, among the mostly indifferent and reluctant writers, every batch of students also has its share of would-be writers. To my surprise, such students try their hand at writing poetry, mostly in Hindi but also in English. Why

poetry? I have often wondered; why not try writing stories or essays. Is it because poetry allows a flexibility and license that prose does not? Is it because poetry can be brief, short? Or is it because longer forms of writing need more stamina than they have? Why is it that students find it hard to write descriptive, narrative or expository pieces? Do they lack the linguistic resources? Or is it that they haven't been taught the skills to write such pieces?

At this point it may be relevant to share that for a large number of government school students, schools are the main places to learn how to read and write, especially in English. The world of academic English found in such schools does not accommodate the variety of English that is found in out-of-school contexts.

Every writer, and especially a seasoned author, knows the value of an empathetic first reader for her/his tentative first draft. The empathetic first reader does not evaluate to correct and mark, but to guide and nurture. How can we make teachers more empathetic readers?

Also, what about the writing life of the teacher herself/himself? We have seldom had any discussion around that. Are the teachers themselves writers? What do they write about? I know that as a researcher, I am really struggling to write my dissertation as it is unlike anything I have written before. As teachers when do we really share our lives and struggles as writers? By doing so we would be able to share our own lived practices of reading and writing with our students, making for more engaged reading-writing teaching/learning experiences.

At a recent in-service training programme, we had several sessions on teaching students how to write. As I had more or less expected, the sessions focused on the form rather than on the purpose of writing, or the demands of writing in different genres. On the last session of the last day, and I am not quite sure how, a few teachers started reading out some of their original

writings. These writings consisted of poems they had written over the years. Suddenly there was a different air and energy in the room. The stodgy dullness that had characterized the preceding days and sessions vanished, and animation and excitement filled the room. The teachers shared rich samples of their writing. They also shared the context in which some of the compositions had been written, how they had crafted the poems, revised their work. I was struck by what we were doing. My head teemed with questions. Why hadn't we thought of this before? Why hadn't we thought of discussing our lives as writers with each other, shared what we were writing, the struggles we faced?

The answers to these questions were not far away. We see our writing lives as being quite separate from our role as teachers who teach writing. When we are in the role of writing teachers in the classroom, we do not really think about developing our students as writers. We just try to fulfil a very limited objective, that of ensuring that our students acquire the necessary skills to write in the form required by the exam system. So we focus on form. We give our students the sentence structure, the opening and closing sentences and the paragraphs, and even tell them what to put into them. We go as per the CBSE marking scheme—the ultimate guide to writing in schools—1 mark for format, so write the heading and the by line; 4 marks for content, you should have 4-5 value points; 5 marks for expression; 2.5 for grammar and spelling, and 2.5 for coherence and relevance. It is clear that writing is not seen as a pleasurable, or useful, or purposeful activity. Most students only write in a test, the rest of the time they simply copy. In fact, as a teacher, I know very little of the writing lives of my students outside of class and school. It is time we paid heed to this and thought of creating opportunities to teach writing the way it should be ... the way it could be.

Endnotes:

¹ This article is based on a presentation made at the “National Conference on Writing in School: Processes, Practices, and the Writer”, organized by the Department of Education, University of Delhi on 21-22 February 2018.

² As part of my research I have been reading a range of literature on various aspects of language and literacy teaching (especially in a second language) such as processes of reading and writing, reading comprehension, meaning making, the transactional nature of reading-writing, reading-writing connections, etc.

References

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