

An Essay on 'Essay Writing'*

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Introduction

Teaching writing is perhaps the most challenging task that any language teacher has to negotiate. The domain of writing ranges from sensory-motor controls to word, phrase and sentence; and from there to writing short and long messages, letters and essays whose defining features include, among others, lexical richness, complex sentence construction, cohesion and coherence. Cohesion, which is defined by linkers and grammatical connectedness, and coherence which semantically and conceptually are constitutive of a text, are indeed the most difficult to achieve. And generally, it is these very aspects of cohesion and coherence that traditional methodology of teaching essay writing militates against. In this article I am going to narrate my pains and joys of learning to write an essay.

Early Schooling

It is with a sense of great misery that I recollect my attempts to write an essay during my school days. I remember once in class five, we were asked to write an essay on the 'cow'. The teacher copied an essay from a guidebook onto the board. We were asked to copy it from the board into our rough notebooks. To tell you the truth, we could not even adequately copy what was written on the board. Somehow, we managed to copy a few chunks in our notebook. Our homework that day was simply to copy the essay into our fair notebook. This was even more

difficult because we were repeatedly told by the teacher to write the essay in correct and elegant-looking words and sentences. He told us that there should be no crossing-out in the fair notebook. In the process of achieving this accuracy and neatness, I tore and destroyed several pages of my fair notebook before I could produce a page that would be acceptable to my teacher.

The next day the teacher asked the children to keep their notebooks on his table. He called each child and checked his/her notebook. Every child prayed that his/her notebook would be at the bottom of the pile. Every child was called by the teacher when his notebook was being corrected. The corrections were done in red. Some essays were crossed out from beginning to end, and some notebooks were thrown out of the window. This was indeed a traumatic experience for all of us. When it was my turn, the teacher filled my notebook with red crosses, and asked me to buy a new notebook and copy the essay properly into it. All the children in the class felt demoralized and were left with no interest in learning.

Rote Learning Stage

The next stage was even worse. The teacher asked us to memorize the essay by heart and then emphasized that we should write only what we had memorized. Not only did this make our task even more difficult but it became nearly

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impossible. In our examination, we would forget almost everything we had memorized. There was no space for our personal and emotional experiences. For example, I had a cow in my house and it was a part of my day to day life. I had several personal and memorable experiences connected with the cow but these were not seen as important for writing the essay on the 'cow'. As we moved up from Class five, the method of essay writing changed. In class six, the teacher stopped writing the essays on the board. He started dictating them. Our task was simple—to listen and write. We would simply keep staring at the face of our teacher. Once in a while we would gather the courage to request the teacher to repeat the essay. Sometimes it worked but mostly he snubbed us. Still, if even one of us succeeded in writing the essay, his/her notebook kept doing the rounds of the class. We could not coordinate the skills involved in listening to sentences of variable complexity, process them in our brain and reproduce them with the fairly robust motor skills required for writing them in our notebook.

There was another problem that confronted us in class six. We were speakers of Malvi and even Hindi was a second language for us. We had now been introduced to English and Sanskrit and were expected to write essays in these languages as well. Even though Sanskrit and Hindi are both written in Devanagari script, the word and phrase level constructions of Sanskrit are far more complex and longer than Hindi. It was not at all easy to reproduce them. In the case of English, we were, of course, completely lost. We had hardly learnt to recognize the letters of the English alphabet and have some hold on the basic vocabulary, when we were asked to write an essay in English.

No Space for Personal Experiences

As we moved to higher classes, the topics for essay writing also started changing. For example,

if there was a general essay to be written on 'A fair', we were supposed to write the one that was available in our book or in the guide. Such essays were structured in prefabricated chunks of introduction, content, advantages and disadvantages, reasons for having a fair and conclusions. There was no way we could violate this format. Such a format could never become an inspiration for us to write an essay. We used to regularly go to fairs in our childhood and have a lot of fun there. Fairs were the only occasion when we could see a film, or a magic show, eat lots of sweets and buy toys. Not only that, preparations for going to the fair would start many days before the actual fair. There would be discussions amongst friends and several plans would be put into place. However, all these experiences found no place in the format of the guide-driven essay of the school. In brief, there was no space either for our experiences or for our imagination.

I should point out that in the middle and high school examinations, essays probably carry the highest marks in the language paper. Students are generally given four or five topics out of which they have to write an essay on one. We had to evaluate strategies and tricks to score the maximum possible marks in the essay we had chosen to write on. Students therefore started memorizing at least two or three essays. The teachers were kind enough to identify two or three essays on topics such as 'Independence Day' or 'Jawaharlal Nehru' that we could rote learn. Then they told us a trick. They said that if we were asked to write an essay on some national festival, we could just reproduce the 'Independence Day' essay. If the essay was on a great leader, we could simply reproduce the 'Nehru' essay. Our exclusive aim was to score the highest possible marks in the essay question, and that consumed all our energy so far as language learning was concerned.

Far away from Authentic Articulation

The pressures of examination were immense, and we lived in a chronic state of fear. Before the examination, we spent all our time in rote learning. However, when we entered the examination hall, the level of anxiety was so high that we forgot everything we had memorized. It was not that we did not have thoughts of our own. In fact, our minds and hearts were full of new ideas and emotions but the system of education and examination provided no space for the articulation of these ideas and emotions. There was another problem. We were very scared of making mistakes. We felt we would make mistakes in listening, mistakes in reading, mistakes in writing and mistakes all around. In fact, we felt that we were just bundles of mistakes.

What does it Mean to Write an Essay?

What is the aim of writing an essay? Why should children learn how to write an essay at all? Language teachers and trainers rarely engage with these questions. Since nobody seriously engages with these questions, there is no preparation either on the part of the teacher or teacher trainers to plan a process through which children might become competent essay writers. In fact, the fundamental objective of writing an essay should be to enable children to express their ideas and feelings in a coherent and cohesive way. As Gijubhai says, anyone who can articulate his ideas in an organized fashion should be regarded as an essay writer. He also says that there are two important components of a good essay: the depth of internal thoughts and the clarity of their expression. If we wish to weave our ideas into an attractive network, a specific sequence, coherence and cohesion of words is necessary. It is indeed unfortunate that these aspects do not find any space in our school education system where the focus is almost exclusively on rote learning.

It is equally unfortunate that when children begin to talk among themselves and articulate their own views, their attempts are silenced as noise and indiscipline. The sign of a good class is that it should be quiet, and every individual child's head should be buried in her or his book. Actually, all children should be encouraged to articulate their views and express their opinion on all events. Secondly, we must encourage reading with understanding. This is absolutely critical for becoming a successful essay writer. There is an urgent need to multiply the spaces where children can read what they like, and be able to talk and write about it. They should also have the freedom to write about what they like in a manner they like. All this can be facilitated by the teachers and be subsequently improved to gain greater coherence and cohesion.

An Experience with a Teacher

I was recently in a teacher training programme in Chhattisgarh. In one of the sessions, we asked the participants to write about their experiences of the caste system in India. We asked the participants to reflect on their childhood, and write about a friend who belonged to an underprivileged section of the society. In the beginning, the participants were rather indifferent. We then said that they could write their experience in any language that they liked, and share it with the rest of the class. We told them that there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers in this project. They had one hour to finish this task. As the participants reflected over the task, they found that one hour was not enough. We were quite happy to give them another half-hour. It is possible that many participants felt that this was a kind of assessment and the whole ambience of the suffocating examination system seemed to have resurfaced. We then clarified that the essays would not be evaluated or given any marks. We told them that we simply wanted them to share

their experiences. The next day the essays were distributed among the participants. Every participant read the essay of another participant teacher. This was a very refreshing experience. The essays had been written with great sensitivity. As the participants read the essays we witnessed that the workshop had become increasingly lively. We realized that once the fear of making mistakes and being evaluated through marks was eliminated, the level and quality of articulation improved significantly.

As we know from the Kothari Commission Report, unless teachers and teacher trainers are exposed to new experiences, they will continue to follow traditional methods of teaching. We only need to take simple steps if we wish to liberate essay writing from the traditional suffocating approaches described earlier in the article.

(Adapted from the original in Hindi by Rama Kant Agnihotri)

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