

# The Impact of VCOP Technique on Developing the Writing Skills of Tertiary Students in the Indian Context: A Study

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## Abstract

**Background/Objectives:** In India, teaching English for learners in heterogeneous and overcrowded classrooms is a challenging task. This study attempts to investigate the effect of teaching Big Writing elements at tertiary level. **Methods/Statistical Analysis:** The study is experimental and it involves a single group. The participants of the study were seventy, first year B.Com students from Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Chennai, South India. Pre-test and post-test were administered before and after the intervention and the result was analysed using SPSS software. **Findings:** The findings of the study suggest that there is a statistically significant improvement in writing abilities of the participants after the Big Writing instruction. **Applications/Improvements:** The Big Writing approach can be used to develop the writing skills of the technical students belonging to polytechnic colleges and engineering students, especially the low achievers.

**Keywords:** Big Writing, English as Second Language, Tertiary Learners, VCOP Technique, Writing Skills

## 1. Introduction

India is a multilingual and multicultural country and English has attained the status of common language for communication. English language, in India, plays a pivotal role in the spheres of education, science, technology, business, entertainment and media. Furthermore, it is the medium of instruction in all private schools and colleges and learners' communicative competence, both oral and written English, is very crucial.

Students, at tertiary level, will need English for Academic Purpose [EAP] or English for Specific Purpose [ESP] depending on the branch they choose for their studies. These students will have a wide variety of purposes to write and moreover, they should be able to write fluently different genres such as reports, descriptions, emails, letters, articles, and research papers. Becoming proficient in writing these texts is not an easy deal for every second language learner<sup>1</sup> rightly describes writing as a complex process neither easy nor spontaneous for many second

language writers. Thus there is a need for teaching, writing skills in schools and colleges through innovative strategies so that students are not only prepared to face exams but also to become efficient writers in English. According to<sup>2</sup>, "the skill of writing well in a second language is important and needs separate and special attention."

Writing efficiently in English, at tertiary level, is quintessential because the learners are assessed, evaluated and graded by their written works. Developing writing skills is invariably one of the responsibilities of teachers of English. However, teaching learners to write in English is a demanding task as writing is a complex process that involves cognitive and intellectual activities. Moreover, writing entails various components such as content, vocabulary, organisation, language use, and mechanics. Apart from the complexity of the writing skill, there are certain factors that affect ESL students' writing abilities. Hence, ESL students need language scaffolding especially to learn to write in English efficiently so that the learners

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achieve academic success and become employable after completing their higher education.

### 1.1 Big Writing / VCOP Technique

'Big writing' is an approach created by Ros Wilson, a highly experienced English educationist, and is marketed by Andrelle Education, a literacy based Education Company which provides professional development to teachers and educators, to raise the writing standards of primary school students in the UK<sup>3</sup>. Big Writing classes are also administered to secondary students as per their needs and are usually conducted for forty five minutes to one hour focusing on speaking and writing skills. "Big Writing is a methodology that is highly enjoyable and motivating and – when done right – has an immediate impact for all children. Proven and effective, Big Writing is the perfect teaching method to raise standards in writing."<sup>4</sup>

Big Writing strategy is used in English classrooms to teach four elements of writing: Vocabulary, Connectives, Openers of sentences, and Punctuation, which promote efficiency in the writing abilities of students. Hence, Big Writing is also known as VCOP technique.

### 1.2 Need for the Study

In India, especially in metropolitan cities like Chennai, tertiary institutions attract students both from urban and rural areas of the nation and also from all over the globe. The mushrooming of IT industries in metropolitan cities also plays a crucial role in the migration of learners to cities seeking admission in tertiary institutions, which the learners presume that it facilitates entry into job markets in a feasible manner. Like engineering colleges, arts and science colleges too promise students scope for better opportunities in the future. As a result, the tertiary institutions in India have students from varied backgrounds and a wide range of abilities. Writing in English, at tertiary level, has become exam oriented and most of the tertiary learners consider writing as a strenuous and boring task. Moreover, due to the influence of technology in the lives of the younger generation, personal writing habits have become endangered. Learners at tertiary level hesitate to write down notes and capture the images of important points written on the board in their mobile phones. This situation has affected the writing abilities of school and college going students. In the words of <sup>5</sup>, "The environment in which today's college students communicate is primarily one of texting and email messages. One

of the main problems with these communication methods is that they may rely on the use of abbreviations and informal language. Punctuation, capitalization, spelling, organization and flow may be forgotten in favor of bits and bytes."

The need for the study began with the current scenario of the English classrooms at tertiary institutions of India and the attitude of the tertiary learners' towards writing in English and also with the assumption that writing skills at tertiary level is not given priority because of the importance given spoken English, which is regarded as an essential employment tool that will fetch BPO and IT jobs after graduation. Supporting this view<sup>5</sup> avers that many courses on developing spoken English are found compared to works on improving writing skills and also emphasizes the need to study the learners' problems and to develop strategies to improve their writing skills in spite of the dearth of time in the academic year.

### 1.3 Previous Researches on Big Writing

A case study project was conducted by<sup>6</sup> of Lomeshaye Junior School, Lancashire, on Big Writing strategy. The findings of the study suggest the impact of the Big Writing strategy on pupils' learning, achievement or enjoyment and how has this been measured as following:

- "Pupils are more confident and very keen to show their writing to the Head teacher. More pieces of writing are now shared in the whole-school Achievement Assembly.
- Pupils are enthusiastic about their writing and are familiar with how to use the VCOP pyramid.
- Pupils are more familiar with self-assessment and can say what their next writing target will be.
- Pupils are empowered to improve their own writing.
- As pupils move from a year group to the next, they are familiar with the writing strategy as a consistent approach has been adopted.
- Writing assessment tracking data shows improvements.
- End of KS2 SATs results in writing show that the percentage of boys achieving level 4 has doubled.
- Opt SATs in Yrs 3, 4 and 5 have also shown a marked improvement in most classes.
- Lesson observations indicate that pupils use a higher level of language in both speaking and writing."

Big Writing approach was investigated by National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), a centre

for educational research and development in England and Wales. The investigation, “Initial Evaluation of the Impact of Big Writing” was done on 635 students belonging to 9 primary schools in the UK. The findings and implications of the ‘Initial Evaluation of the Impact of Big Writing’ programmer suggest that teachers and students are strongly positive about the Big Writing approach and its effectiveness in enhancing teaching writing for primary students and their writing performance and attitudes.

An experimental study was conducted to measure the efficacy of Big Writing elements in developing the high school students’ writing ability<sup>2</sup>. The participants of the study were fifteen high school students, who were at an average level of language proficiency and belonged to the age group of 14 and 15 years. The students took a pre-test and a post-test on paragraph writing tasks before and after taking Big Writing classes. The findings of this study suggest that the big writing session is effective in developing the writing abilities of the high school students.

#### 1.4 VCOP Technique for Tertiary Students

VCOP technique is not constrained to school students. It can be modified as per the needs of the tertiary learners. At tertiary level, students need to write different types of texts in English and they also require excellent writing competence in English to score higher in their major papers.

The Big Writing elements encompass the basic components of any type of text. They also form the major components that are assessed in writing. Hence, enriching students’ knowledge of VCOP will definitely develop their writing competency in English.

In the light of the previous researches conducted on Big Writing and analyzing the needs of the tertiary learners, for the current study the VCOP technique was modified. Instead of teaching students to start sentences creatively, accuracy in the openers of sentences was given importance and so subject-verb agreement was taught since accuracy in the sentence construction is one of the concerns of ESL teachers in India. Hence, for the study purpose, openers of sentences refer to subject-verb agreement. Moreover, so far the research pertained to ELT at tertiary level has addressed on developing individual components of writing such as vocabulary or connectives but none of them attempted to study the development of essay writing skills by focusing on a group of writing components collectively. The current study is designed to bridge this gap.

## 2. Objectives

The study addresses the use of Big Writing strategy in the Indian context, especially on developing the writing abilities of tertiary students. The study is significant as the impact of Big Writing on tertiary students is rarely explored by the researchers.

The objective of the study is to determine whether the Big Writing approach has any significant impact on tertiary students’ writing abilities. The study, especially, seeks answer to the following questions:

- Does Big Writing approach, which is used to raise the writing standards of school students, significantly affect the writing abilities of tertiary students?
- What is the impact of teaching ‘Big Writing’ elements on female and male participants?
- Is there any statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the participants who had vernacular medium instruction at higher secondary level?

## 3. Methodology

The design of the study was experimental which involved only an experimental group. The experimental group’s data before and after the Big Writing classes was analysed and compared to evaluate the impact of using Big Writing strategy in developing the writing abilities of tertiary students. The study consisted of the following sequence: pre-test, intervention and post-test. Before the intervention, a pre-test on the essay writing task was conducted and the topic given for the pre-test was, ‘Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Computers and Internet’ Then Big Writing classes were conducted to teach vocabulary, connectives, openers of sentences and punctuation. At the end of the Big Writing session the researcher administered the post-test. The post-test was an essay writing task on the topic, ‘The Effects of Pollution on the Environment’. For both the tests, the word limit was fixed as 300 and the duration allotted was 30 minutes.

### 3.1 The Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were seventy first year B.Com students of Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Chennai, South India, who were at an intermediate level of English language skills, belonging to the age group between 17 and 21. The participants had

their higher secondary education either through English medium instruction or vernacular medium instruction. Out of seventy participants three participants were absent for the pre-test and five participants were absent for the post-test. Hence, the data analysis was carried on sixty five participants, which consisted of 54 males and 11 females.

#### 4. Scope and Limitations

The study was conducted once a week for a semester long and restricted to seventy students belonging to the first year B.Com stream in Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Hence, the results of the study may be applicable only to the similar level of learners in the first year undergraduate courses. The study can be further carried out in a wider perspective by increasing the duration of the study and on engineering students to improve their technical writing skills.

#### 5. Analysis and Interpretation of Data

This study was an attempt to determine the effect of Big Writing approach in the Indian context especially on developing the writing abilities of tertiary students. This section presents the results of the data analysis of the sixty five participants of the study.

First, the data collected from the sixty five participants on pre-test and post-test was evaluated using the essay rating scale from ESL composition profile (Appendix I) formulated by<sup>8</sup> to assess the essays of the participants. Both the results were computed, analysed and interpreted using the SPSS paired samples test to measure the efficacy of Big Writing classes on developing the writing abilities of the tertiary students. The mean differences between pre-test and post-test of the experimental group, t value and p value were calculated.

The results of the data analysis are given below.

##### Research question 1

- Does Big Writing approach, which is used to raise the writing standards of school students, significantly affect the writing abilities of tertiary students?

Table 1 compares the mean scores and the standard deviation of the four elements of Big Writing before and after the intervention by the pre-test and post- test results. From Table 2, it is obvious that the participants of the

**Table 1.** Comparison of the Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Elements	Test	Mean	N	Std. Dev	't' value	'p' value
Vocabulary	Pre	10.92	65	2.814	-4.861	0.000*
	Post	12.20	65	2.762		
Connectives	Pre	11.54	65	3.270	-6.378	0.000*
	Post	12.62	65	3.339		
Openers (SVA)	Pre	11.66	65	4.280	-2.927	0.005*
	Post	12.45	65	3.933		
Punctuation	Pre	2.63	65	.575	-3.399	0.001*
	Post	2.83	65	.547		

\*significant at the level of 0.05

**Table 2.** Comparison of the Test Scores of the Female and Male participants

Elements	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev	't' value	'p' value
V_ pre	Boys	54	10.56	2.765	-2.420	.018
	Girls	11	12.73	2.412		
V_ post	Boys	54	11.91	2.701	-1.932	.058
	Girls	11	13.64	2.730		
C_ pre	Boys	54	11.07	3.232	-2.654	.010
	Girls	11	13.82	2.483		
C_ post	Boys	54	12.19	3.239	-2.385	.020
	Girls	11	14.73	3.133		
O_ pre	Boys	54	11.02	3.993	-2.826	.006
	Girls	11	14.82	4.423		
O_ post	Boys	54	11.96	3.875	-2.264	.027
	Girls	11	14.82	3.459		
P_ pre	Boys	54	2.59	.567	-1.190	.238
	Girls	11	2.82	.603		
Pun_ post	Boys	54	2.81	.552	-.518	.606
	Girls	11	2.91	.539		

Significant at the level of 0.05%

study have shown a statistically significant improvement in the four assessment variables: vocabulary (t=4.861, p=0.000), connectives (t=6.378, p=0.000), openers of sentences (t=2.927, p=0.005) and punctuations (t=3.399, t=0.001). It is also evident from Chart 1 that the participants have scored better in the post-test. Therefore, the

study suggests that teaching Big Writing elements has made a significant difference in the writing abilities of the first year under graduate students.

### Research question 2

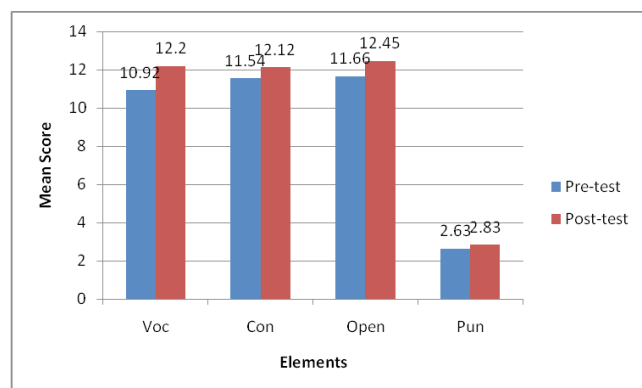
- What is the impact of teaching 'Big Writing' elements on female and male participants?

Table 2 reveals that female participants have performed better than the male participants both in the pre-test and the post-test. This is evident from the differences in the mean scores and the test statistics of the four assessment variables. When the post-test VCOP scores of the female and male participants are compared, it is computed that female participants have outperformed male participants in vocabulary ( $t=1.932$ ,  $p=.058$ ), connectives ( $t=2.385$ ,  $p=.020$ ) and openers of sentences ( $t=2.264$ ,  $p=.027$ ) but not in punctuations ( $t=5.18$ ,  $p=.606$ ) are shown in Figure 1.

### Research question 3

- Is there any statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the participants who had vernacular medium instruction at higher secondary level?

Out of 65 participants of the study, 49 participants had their higher secondary level from English medium schools and 16 participants from vernacular medium schools. It is a known fact that English medium students generally do better in English than the vernacular medium students. However, the researchers analysed and compared the pre-test and post-test scores of the vernacular medium participants to ascertain the differences in their writing abilities before and after the intervention. Table 3 shows



**Figure 1.** Comparison of the pre-test and post-test VCOP scores of the participants.

**Table 3.** T test results of the essay writing scores of the vernacular medium participants

Medium of instruction	Group	N	Test	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	't' value	'p' value
Vernacular	Control	16	Pre-test	27.25	4.89	1.20	3.306	0.004
			Post-test	29.81	5.46	1.36		

Significant at the level of 0.05%

that there is a statistically significant difference in the essay writing abilities of the participants in the control group after the Big Writing instruction. The results favour Big Writing instruction indicated by the difference in pre-test and post-test mean scores (2.56), t-value (3.306) and p-value (0.004).

## 6. Suggestions and Conclusion

The study was an attempt to focus on enriching tertiary learners' knowledge of vocabulary, connectives, openers of sentences and punctuation to develop their English writing skills. The findings of the study suggest that the Big Writing approach which involves teaching of VCOP has made a significant positive impact on the writing abilities of the first year B.Com students. Hence, the approach can be incorporated into the English syllabus of the first year under graduate students to develop their writing skills. Furthermore, special writing classes can be designed using this approach to cater to the needs of the low achieving learners, who are from rural back grounds, first generation learners and vernacular medium learners. Big Writing approach can also be integrated into a short term remedial crash course for developing the technical writing skills of engineering students.

However, the study is restricted to seventy participants belonging to the first year B.Com batch from Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The study, in future, can be conducted on a wider range of participants belonging to polytechnic of engineering colleges.

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## Appendix I

ESL Composition Profile: Essay rating scale (Jacobs et al., 1981)

ESL COMPOSITION PROFILE			
STUDENT	DATE	TOPIC	
SCORE	LEVEL	CRITERIA	COMMENTS
CONTENT	30-27	EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: knowledgeable • substantive • thorough development of thesis • relevant to assigned topic	
	26-22	GOOD TO AVERAGE: some knowledge of subject • adequate range • limited development of thesis • mostly relevant to topic, but lacks detail	
	21-17	FAIR TO POOR: limited knowledge of subject • little substance • inadequate development of topic	
	16-13	VERY POOR: does not show knowledge of subject • non-substantive • not pertinent • OR not enough to evaluate	
ORGANIZATION	20-18	EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: fluent expression • ideas clearly stated/ supported • succinct • well-organized • logical sequencing • cohesive	
	17-14	GOOD TO AVERAGE: somewhat choppy • loosely organized but main ideas stand out • limited support • logical but incomplete sequencing	
	13-10	FAIR TO POOR: non-fluent • ideas confused or disconnected • lacks logical sequencing and development	
	9-7	VERY POOR: does not communicate • no organization • OR not enough to evaluate	
VOCABULARY	20-18	EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: sophisticated range • effective word/ idiom choice and usage • word form mastery • appropriate register	
	17-14	GOOD TO AVERAGE: adequate range • occasional errors of word/idiom form, choice, usage <i>but meaning not obscured</i>	
	13-10	FAIR TO POOR: limited range • frequent errors of word/idiom form, choice, usage • <i>meaning confused or obscured</i>	
	9-7	VERY POOR: essentially translation • little knowledge of English vocabulary, idioms, word form • OR not enough to evaluate	
LANGUAGE USE	25-22	EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: effective complex constructions • few errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions	
	21-18	GOOD TO AVERAGE: effective but simple constructions • minor problems in complex constructions • several errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions <i>but meaning seldom obscured</i>	
	17-11	FAIR TO POOR: major problems in simple/complex constructions • frequent errors of negation, agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions and/or fragments, run-ons, deletions • <i>meaning confused or obscured</i>	
	10-5	VERY POOR: virtually no mastery of sentence construction rules • dominated by errors • does not communicate • OR not enough to evaluate	
MECHANICS	5	EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: demonstrates mastery of conventions • few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing	
	4	GOOD TO AVERAGE: occasional errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing <i>but meaning not obscured</i>	
	3	FAIR TO POOR: frequent errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing • poor handwriting • <i>meaning confused or obscured</i>	
	2	VERY POOR: no mastery of conventions • dominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing • handwriting illegible • OR not enough to evaluate	
TOTAL SCORE	READER	COMMENTS	

Figure 6.3 Jacobs et al.'s (1981) scoring profile