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**BLOG WRITING: A MOTIVATIONAL PEDAGOGY TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS IN
ENGINEERING STUDENTS**

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ABSTRACT

The ability to express one's ideas in writing is one of the vital skills that can pave the path of success for Engineering professionals. Many engineering students find it difficult to write reader-friendly materials for different purposes in an organized manner, with a suitable style and format. In this regard, an English language teacher's job does not finish with teaching them a few writing tips and making them aware of different styles of writing in a class. Practice is a must if they want to achieve a commendable grip over writing skills. Classroom teaching has its own limitations. Time constraint, limited number of classes, large classrooms and the pressure to complete the prescribed syllabus in time, are a few challenges to be mentioned in the list. To widen the scope of students to practice writing more, a teacher may think of various strategies without overburdening the students. One such strategy is creating class blog to facilitate learning outside the class. Blogging as a pedagogy to teach writing can be a very meaningful and an enjoyable experience where students will gradually acquire writing competence which in turn will guarantee their personal, academic and professional success.

Key words: Writing skill, blogging, class blog, English language teacher, motivation

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Lack of proficiency over English language among India's engineering graduates has been a matter of concern not only for those who are associated with teaching engineering students but also to the industry and the professional bodies since the early 1990s. The recruiters often show interest in roping those talented youth who not only carry an engineering degree with them but also possess strong communication skills and an array of soft skills. It is observed that to crack job interviews, learners are often encouraged to come out of their shells and make efforts to overcome their stage fear and put forth their ideas in front of others. However, in this process the objective of improving learners' speaking skills gets prominence over attaining a commendable hold over writing skills. The pressure on teachers to complete syllabus in a stipulated time frame sometimes act as a roadblock where the learners may not get the necessary encouragement to inculcate a flair for academic and professional writing. The irony is that in the engineering curricula, the importance of acquiring writing skills often is ignored and students also focus more on the core technical

subjects without realizing the far-reaching benefits of writing competence. According to Davis, "No act of thinking is complete till its products have been set forth in words."

In the professional arena an engineer spends a fair amount of time in communicating with superiors, colleagues, subordinates or with customers- be it speaking or writing. The act of writing is pervasive in one's personal and professional life. Writing is considered more challenging and complex compared to conveying an idea orally and thus requires a constant endeavour to develop it as a skill. This paper discusses how blog-writing can serve to be an apt platform to motivate students to improve their writing skills.

In India English language teachers have to deal with diverse issues in engineering colleges. Firstly, students pursuing a professional course come with a preconceived notion that writing in English is not much required for them and dedicate more time and effort in excelling in their core subjects. It is observed that a majority of engineering students in spite of their English medium schooling face challenges to pen down their thoughts. The problems they face may be of different kinds such as lack of vocabulary, poor grammatical knowledge resulting into syntactical errors, unity of theme, coherency, clarity and organization. On the top of it lack of ideation is a major concern.

Their dealing with English as a subject is pretty interesting. Drilling a few answers from the textual lessons, memorizing vocabulary items or a few grammar rules are some of the methods that they are accustomed to deal with English as a subject and all that they do, is from passing an exam point of view. Then there are students who fail to give themselves enough time to handle the complex process of planning, drafting, revising, and editing their work. They write to pass an exam but are hardly taught how to write. Students coming from vernacular medium often struggle more with writing. Their poor grade may discourage them or frustrate them. If engineering students can be motivated from the very beginning to jot down their thoughts in writing with clarity and accuracy, it would have a positive impact on their writing and writing itself will be an enjoyable process.

In the 21st century, the youth have become more tech savvy and spend a lot of time in social media websites which have indeed revolutionized the mode of communication. These days from a very tender age the learners get accustomed to use computers, smart phones, tablets etc. Pen and paper have taken a backseat. This has become a primary concern for teachers as the SMS language or txt-lingo has given rise to a more lax attitude towards academic writing in terms of vocabulary, spelling and grammar. The excessive use of textese has resulted into a downfall in academic as well as business writing. English language, which is so rich, today is overshadowed by strange abbreviations like C U for see you, LOL for laugh out loud, 2de for today, b/w for between etc. Engineering students are observed to struggle to write even a simple paragraph. Due to this, more errors occur in spelling, grammar or sentence constructions. It is very alarming to see how the engineering students fall to its prey and fail to exhibit quality writing in examinations and professional writing.

Learners must realise that to escalate the ladder of professional success one must acquire not only good speaking skills but also effective writing skill. An English teacher's job in a multilingual and multicultural classroom setting of India is not all easy. On the top of it when most of the engineering students do not prioritize English over their core subjects the difficulty level rises.

A language teacher may try to give his/her best to the students but with a fixed time frame of limited classroom sessions, prescribed syllabus, the target of class performance or university results, there remains so many things that cannot be done in a class especially when it comes to writing. In a particular academic programme students do write a number of assignments. However, the quality and originality of those assignments is questionable. It is very unfortunate that many students realise the importance of writing when at the later stage of their engineering they are forced to write project or seminar reports, lab reports, dissertations etc but before that strangely most of them remain unconvinced that this gift of writing would help them to be unique among the rest and pave their way to success. In our present education system from the very beginning students usually have very limited experience in extended writing, exhibiting creativity and originality. In the absence of experienced and trained faculty, students also may not receive appropriate, constructive and continuous feedback to ensure improvement. Sometimes in the race of completing the

prescribed syllabus proper assessment and feedback are compromised. Plagiarism is another serious problem in the writings as students struggle with original ideation and cannot transfer their thoughts into words clearly in an organized manner.

There is no denial of the fact that there are problems. But can a true teacher stop with identifying problems or strive for solution? A.P. J. Kalam once said, "*We should not give up and we should not allow the problem to defeat us.*" Perhaps this should be the spirit of any dynamic teacher. Instead of finding fault with the system, a language teacher may look for other solutions so that students can gradually improve their writing skills. A teacher may come out of the narrow confines of the actual classroom and can think of extending the teaching-learning experience by incorporating a blended teaching for a greater benefit. Today's generation is blessed with computer-aided technologies but if they are used for positive outcomes, they will not only benefit the students but will also inspire them to be more engaged and get the maximum benefit of learning.

In the context of the present paper, the author proposes to create a class blog for a particular section of an Engineering branch. This can serve as an extraordinary tool where students can be motivated to write and post a piece of writing with good quality and content. These days the youth spend a lot of time on internet browsing or on various social networking sites. In doing so they may waste their precious time without any positive gain.

However, the idea of creating a blog for a class with the objective to improve students' writing skills can really be a wonderful initiative from a language teacher. In a traditional classroom, a teacher may take certain topics on writing and discuss them like essay writing, précis writing, expansion and so on. But due to time constraint multiple practising to improve compositional skills remains an unfulfilled desire of a language teacher. First of all, in a professional institution there are pre-planned assignments, term papers and class tests that students are bound to complete and no one can deny the fact that in the set teaching schedule a teacher hardly has any time left to make students involve in serious writing tasks in class to improve their writing skill.

A class blog can bridge this gap. Once introduced to students may fetch amazing results in polishing their writing skill. A teacher here must guide the students about his/her expectations to maintain the quality of the posts. A student should be alert towards grammatical errors, syntactical errors, verbosity, wrong usage of punctuation, jargons, textese etc. If needed, the student can seek the teacher's help in this regard. Before making his/her writing public, the student must be careful about improvising the drafts several times and carefully proofread them.

True teaching-learning cannot be confined within the four walls of a classroom. Writing for the class blog will be an enriching experience for both the writer and for those who read them. It will help them to become clearer with their ideas; it will help them to choose right words according to a context. The main idea is to get across his/her own ideas with others and to achieve the goal, one must learn how to write with accuracy, clarity and coherence. Through blog writing students can acquire techniques of expansion as well as brevity in writing according to the genre.

Though the students would have the liberty to select any theme of their choice, the experience to read them should be an enriching one. These days, students are overburdened with projects, assignments, exams and what not. This blog writing will let their creative soul free and act as a perfect stress buster. Writing here is therapeutic.

The author of the blog will invite others to leave their comments after reading the posts. It is a well-known fact that a student is always more open to his peer assessment than his/her teacher's. The whole class in being involved in reading, analyzing, assessing and commenting on their colleague's posts, grow more responsible and sensitive. The teacher, just like other readers may leave his/her comment after going through the post. Instead of merely finding problems with a student's writing the teacher can direct them towards higher level of writing goals and offer constructive criticism. Any student whoever writes for the blog, feels thrilled with his/her creation and remains excited to see the comments from his/her viewers. The teacher here must encourage the students not to get disheartened to see any negative feedback. At the same time the

entire class should be enlightened about writing sensitive and constructive feedback. In doing so, the peer group also acts responsibly and learns how to write productive and sensitive comments.

If the feedback is insightful students also feel motivated to write with sincerity and with utmost care. The whole idea of blog writing is very interesting as the students enjoy a lot of flexibility and feel relaxed as there is no sense of penalty in terms of marks or points. There is no fixed time frame or there is no imposition of a particular topic on the students. They can write at their own pace on anything that they like. The teacher as a facilitator here supports students to overcome their fear of writing as they are given the necessary freedom to make mistakes, learn from their mistakes, experiment and taste the joy of creation. In the words of Anita Desai, "Someone who wants to write should make an effort to write a little something every day. Writing in this sense is the same as athletes who practice a sport every day to keep their skills honed." (Tandon:205)

If students are motivated to inculcate the habit of writing not only for passing exams but for the sheer joy of writing, the fear to pen down the thoughts will automatically vanish. With constant practice and motivation from teachers and peer group, students will be more enthusiastic and comfortable to express their views on a topic with a positive mindset to face any criticism. To improve further, students should reflect on their previous mistakes and may think of incorporating the suggestions given by the language teacher or fellow classmates. Reflection is a meta-cognitive process that will help them to be self-critic. They will also learn to assess the worth of their creation. With an encouragement to share through blog writing the teacher can help students to be independent, original thinkers and develop their individual and dynamic style.

Once a student sends his/her post, the immediate feedback can be really fulfilling and will motivate others too to come out of their shell and take part in the writing journey. A teacher can guide the students how to rate someone's post objectively. If someone rates a fellow classmate's post to be excellent, let him/her also elaborate on the reasons behind tagging it excellent. Such a practice requires more involvement and seriousness and can lead to a healthy competition. The additional suggestion and perspective from readers will definitely encourage students to bring out meaningful and enjoyable content for them.

Every time a student shares his/her ideas on the blog he/she will be more proactive and put his/her 100% to cater to the taste of the readers. Each time he/she would try harder to put forth a better piece of writing. To do so, students will read more to get an exposure to a variety of style and expressions. Other than the primary goal of helping students achieve fine writing skills, the class blog will also help students to know each other better. They will learn how every individual looks differently, thinks differently and thus help them become more open towards different perspectives. They will be better with their people's skills. Students who are introvert may feel more comfortable in sharing their views on a blog than expressing them orally in public. The whole exercise can make students very confident and such a platform helps them to build their image, which is motivating to those who also aspire to be good writers.

H.W. Beecher said, "God made man to go by motives, and he will not go without them any more than a boat without steam, or a balloon without gas. Find out what motivates man, touch that button to turn the key that makes men achieve." (Helmlinger, 1997). It is true that once students are motivated they will be more energetic and be active in what they do. Today's generation is comfortable with technology-aided tools and spends a considerable amount of time with gadgets. Teachers can channelize this interest of students towards the goal of improving their writing skills. The pride of creating something new will boost a student's self-esteem and drive him/her to put more effort in writing. The joy of overcoming the fear to write will turn them to be confident individuals. Blog writing, indeed, can help students to continuously try to improve their writing quality and shape them as creative thinkers.

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