Writing Skill for Social Work Students: Honing English Language through Innovative Inputs

Dr Beena Antony Reji
Associate Professor, Aditi Mahavidyalaya, University of Delhi
Dr Pooja Khanna
Assistant Professor, Aditi Mahavidyalaya, University of Delhi

Abstract

Stepping into college life is like a gradual transition towards increased connectivity to a new progressive environment. It is a pathway towards independent action and thought. Social work course prepares the student to be a professional at the completion of the degree. There are many theoretical inputs, methods and skills that are taught as part of the curriculum, all these together create a professional social worker. Among the various new learnings there is a new adaptability needs of honing of the communicative skills, through effective use of language, which is of paramount requirement to be an effective social worker. Majority of the students in India come from a diverse background and may not be at a comfortable level to express their innate potential in a second language. Therefore, arises the need to find ways and means of faster adaptability towards understanding and expressing in a language different than our mother tongue or the common language in use. The present research article is based on a qualitative study to understand the importance and the ways to enhance writing skills among social work students. The primary data were collected by interviews of alumnae social work student of a college in Delhi. This study would be of interest to social work students and professional wanting to enhance their reading and writing skills and be more effective at work.

Keywords : Social worker, Students, Reading skills, Writing skills, Communication

I. INTRODUCTION

Professional Social work education prepares the student to be a social worker providing an ameliorative service to the community. After a graduation in social work, that is commonly called Bachelors in Social work (BSW) and the post-graduation is called Masters in Social work (MSW) in India, the students are ready to seek employment in the Government and Non-government sector, working for the weaker sections of the society. As an educator it has been observed that there are various skills to be learned in the journey of becoming an effective social worker like communication, organization, critical thinking, empathy. Social workers work with human beings and the community is the laboratory of the social worker.

Communication skill is debated as a basic competence required for social work practitioners and this makes it mandatory to include this skill in the social work curriculum.
Effective communication will make the social worker more effective in reaching out to the client and the community they are working in. Communication skills is much more than just verbal and non-verbal communication, it involves a whole range of our abilities like acceptance, active listening, dealing with the barriers in communications, empathy, feedback (Moss 2017).

One of the most essential expertise to secure a better or a higher paid employment in social work is writing skills. Social workers are required to write elaborate multiple reports for various purposes. The project proposal to the donors, the work report, monthly reports, annual reports all are as important as the work itself. Documentation would encompass effective writing skills.

Alter and Adkin (2001) observed a declining ability in social work students to write proficiently and recommended writing assistance program to develop the students. Students in social work courses are introduced to report writing from Day 1 of their Social work curriculum (Orientation program) at graduation and post-graduation levels.

Rationale of this Study

This research-based article is an attempt to understand the writing skills requirement of social workers and how social work students can be helped to improve on this skill. English is the language that is predominantly used in the government and non-government national and international developmental sectors in Delhi. Thus, this research study examined the writing skills in English language by the social workers in the field. The social work ex-students who have passed out of the college and now presently working would be able to through knowledge on what are the requirements of the organizations.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was conducted with the social work alumnae of a college in Delhi. This college is situated in the out-skirts of Delhi and caters mostly to rural women students. Most of the students have studied English language as their second language in school. The present study was conducted with the objective to understand the importance of writing skills and how to help students to improve on the writing skills. The specific objectives were to investigate the perspectives of employed professional social worker on the writing skills requirement in their profession and to plan out an intervention program to help the social work students when they are in college to develop writing skills. The employed passed out students of this college constituted the universe of the study. The sample size of fifteen professional social workers were selected by purposive sampling. Data was collected by interviewing the selected sample who had completed their Bachelors in Social work from this college and were now employed. The primary data collected was analyzed to understand the views and perspectives of the respondents and to plan out an intervention program to help enhance the writing skills in English language.
III. Findings of the Study

The fifteen respondents were interviewed to understand their views, perspectives and experience as employed professional social workers on the importance of writing skills required by a social worker. The average age of the respondents was 30 years, ranging from 25 to 35 years. All the respondents were women as it was a women’s college. All of them were married. They were presently working at Government, non-government and international organizations. They all had children and also managed their home. All of the respondents were at the managerial position as either Managers, Welfare officer, Superintendent, Project coordinators, Program officer and Program assistant. Majority, (twelve) 80% of them had done their Masters in Social work (post-graduation) as they wanted to get better job opportunities, one of the respondents had also completed Masters in Philosophy (She further wanted to do a Ph.D. but her family wanted her married and settled). The average monthly income was 48,000/-, with the maximum of a respondent earning one lakh per month.

Skills for Social workers

The respondents listed out the important skills required by a professional social worker as per their experience in their work place:

- Communication skills: This is the most important skill as per the respondents. Social workers need to be able to communicate well with the senior and junior staff within the organization and the target or beneficiaries’ groups of the agency. The social worker needs to be clear and transparent with communicating with senior government or donor agencies. This communication can be in the form of oral and written. One of the respondents specified that she often has to make presentation of her work, so presentations need to be very well planned and executed. All the fifteen working social workers emphasized on the importance of writing skills. The respondents also emphasized that English is very important, all files and correspondence in Government and non-government sectors is in English language.

- Organizational Skills: The respondents expressed the necessity of this skill to be an effective social worker. The social worker has to plan, coordinate and finally execute the work. This needs managerial skills to delegate work, get the staff to do the work. One of the respondents shared that in the institution that she manages, they are understaffed, so she has to motivate, encourage and allocate work among the staff to complete all the tasks. The organization skills spill over to the other skills like facilitator and coordinator. The professional social workers working in organizations
facilitate and coordinate the programs of the agency.

- Critical and innovative thinking - the professional workers are working with individuals, groups and communities. This encompasses the skill to think, plan and analyze the situation. Critical thinking, thinking ‘out of the box’ helps in bringing in new, creative and innovative means of solving the issues and challenges faced is essential for the social worker.

- Empathy - Social workers have this inherent quality and skill of empathy. If not, it has to be learned. Empathy is to think, feel and understand the issues and challenges of the client and the beneficiary groups. This skill helps the social worker to reach out to the weaker sections of the society and help them in empowerment and seeking social justice.

- Negotiation and advocacy - The social workers are involved in the task of advocacy and negotiation as part of their work profile. This demands specific skills of convincing and persuasion for advocacy and negotiation. For example, organizations working for the rights of sexual minorities have displayed skills of advocacy and negotiated the acceptance of sexual minorities in the society, that was so hostile and intolerant to sexual minorities.

- Networking - social workers need to enhance the skill of networking so as to reach out to individuals at all the positions of the society. This could be the government or higher officials, middle level workers or the beneficiaries in the community. This demands the skill to build up relationships and keeping those relationship as resources.

- Counseling skills - the social workers when working with individuals and groups are also involved with helping and counseling them. Social workers build up on this skill over a period of time with experience and patience.

- Self-awareness and developing oneself - Social workers like all other professional need to be aware of themselves, their assets and their weaknesses. Strengthening their assets and improving on their weaknesses is paramount for self-development. This would involve self-care, self-motivation, learning and an increase in their knowledge and skills to build in more confidence.

**Writing Skill: Need and Importance**

All the respondents stated that communication skill is most important skill for a social worker. Communication holds the key to success of a professional social worker. They further elaborated that writing well is also an essential skill which helps them to rise higher in the agency or in getting better jobs. Respondents acknowledged that the better they
could write their reports and presentations they were more accepted and could fetch higher salaries.

The respondents mentioned the different forms of writing that were involved in their job profile that requires the skill of effective writing. Respondents cited that through reports they conveyed all the work that is performed by the team in the community. Reports also contains all details of the process entailed and the end results. One respondent said that donor agencies want to read the success stories and the difficult cases studies with the intervention provided. Effective reporting brings out a descriptive presentation of the scene at ground level. For example, a respondent elaborated that their partner agencies are from Netherlands and they are interested in minute details in the reports. Another respondent stated that she was responsible for all the monthly and annual reports in her organization, which should be perfect. In addition to these another very important written document that needs a lot of attention and precision is the Fund-raising proposals in the organizations. These needs to be crafted and written it utmost care as this will help the organizations to sustain and survive.

**Initiative to develop writing skills**

The respondents unanimously agreed that English writing skills are very essential for the job description of social workers in government, non-government at national and international organizations. Few of the respondents mentioned that their work place directly or indirectly encouraged them to enhance their English writing skills. The training programs, the constructive feedbacks, regular dialogues and brainstorming sessions helped the respondents to upgrade their skills. Practice and experience also fine-tuned their oral and written presentations. Most of the respondents dedicated time to reading to polish their English language. Reading books, journals, previous reports and records helped them improve their knowledge, understanding and the language too. One of the respondents shared that she did courses from British council on English speaking. Another respondent engaged herself in free lancing content writing to enhance her writing skill.

The commonality in all the respondents were the urge and enthusiasm to better themselves in English language so that they would be able to perform better and be more confident. One of the respondents stated that to be effective social workers “We work in the area of empowerment of the underprivileged sections of the society, for which firstly we need to develop and empower ourselves. For which we need to work on our language, accent, body language and our knowledge base”.

**The Intervention Program**

The findings from the interviews clearly showed the need to develop a command on communication skills and the importance of English language oral and written to be an effective social worker. The researchers have evolved an intervention program discussing the importance and the
method to enhance reading skill that will further advance the writing skill. This intervention program would be of benefit to the social work students and professionals to improve their reading and writing skills.

Good writing can only come with efficient reading. Reading and comprehension is the essence of constructing meaning from text. It is an active process involving cognitive engagement which enables the reader to create a mental representation of what one reads. In order to read well one needs to engage in the process of what we call close reading. To understand what is important and worthy in a text requires the active use of intellectual skills. You need to master the art of close reading and practice it closely. The skill lies in reading purposely not blindly. Have an agenda, goal or objective when you read. This helps to shape the nature of what you read and how you read. The pattern varies according to situation and purpose. However, the universal purpose at the core of all reading is to figure out what the writer has to say on the given subject. When a writer writes he/she usually gives words to thoughts and ideas. When we read, we try to translate words into meaning? It is an analytic, evaluative and creative task to mirror the intent of the writer accurately without distortion of the original.

Reading is a process that involves decoding of information in a text. This decoding depends on your ability to read, understand and interpret words, phrases, sentence and symbols inherent in a text and the message that these written words or visuals convey. When we talk of meaning we have to keep in mind that there are a lot of other aspects of the meaning that you have to be aware of when interpreting a text. This is called Polysemy or multiple meaning. Let us take an example. The word “fair” can be used to denote many things.

1. She has a fair chance of winning the competition. (adjective : meaning reasonable)
2. She has a fair hair (fair means light opposite of dark)
3. That is not a fair thing to say (adjective meaning ‘just’)
4. His knowledge of Hindi is fair (adjective meaning not very good nor very bad)
5. The handsome hero fell in love with the fair maid (fair meaning beautiful)

Along with Polysemy (multiple meanings) English has a lot of different words with similar but slightly different meanings. For example, the word fair in the dictionary may be interpreted as light, blonde, pale, colourless, bleach. The term for such similar words is synonymy. In analyzing the text during a close reading, we also need to know collocations and connotations.

The word collocation means that certain words are used with each other in fairly fixed ways in English. All synonyms of the word cannot be replaced in the original. For example, ‘Fair’ can be used to denote hair, as can be blonde and bleached (though the meaning they convey may be slightly different) but you cannot use ‘pale’ and ‘colourless’ which usually collates with ‘gas’ or ‘liquid’.
Connotation implies that words not only have meanings, they also have associations. It is important to know what connotation a word had. For example, “Snow White”, “the fairer sex”, “who’s the fairest of them all” have connotations in English fairy tales and need to be understood in proper context before interpreting a text. Knowledge of the variety of meanings a word may convey facilitates close reading.

How we read depends on what we read. We apply different mindsets while reading textbooks, newspapers, history books or magazines. Once we recognize this variability, we focus on the reading skills and reading tools that we would apply to the text in hand. This leads to productive reading where the purpose of reading is aligned with the author’s purpose in writing. Thus, close reading engages you in the act of synthesis. You dissect the text into its composite elements and also discuss how these elements come together to form a whole.

Reading is a basic and lifelong skill which is the cornerstone of success, directly or indirectly, in an individual’s life. In a workplace, good reading and comprehension skills lead to job success and enhances one’s prospects for personal and career-oriented growth. Despite the importance attached to this language chiseling skill, it is still one of the most challenging areas in the education system.

English is taught as compulsory subject in most schools and colleges across the country and is in fact considered a symbol of status. It is the language of correspondence in most offices and opens the gates to high-ranking jobs; yet, sadly so reading, speaking and writing skills post a great handicap to most individuals. This increases the need to teach reading strategies that can assist the learners to inculcate better reading skills which will aid their day-to-day communication. Techniques like reading aloud, silent reading, summarizing the reading texts, identifying structures and patterns contained in the reading text, deciphering grammatical uses and developing the ability to answer simple questions based on text are a great help for struggling learners. However, the use of the techniques should be systematic and regular, not need based. Some of the reading strategies to hone comprehension include igniting background knowledge to advantage, questioning and inferencing, predicting and summarizing, visualizing and comprehension monitoring, vocabulary and semantic processing—depending upon the purpose and need, the reader should adopt a strategy that suits her in the given situation.

The students can be helped by these practices based thought-provoking and engaging activities. Here are two interesting methods through which language skills, mainly speaking and writing, can be enriched and a degree of confidence in communicating ideas and thoughts can be achieved.

We may call the first one as "MY MINI DICTIONARY". As the title conveys, vocabulary enrichment in a new language is the foundation stone that precedes meaningful
sentence structure in expressing thoughts and ideas. Vocabulary and word power can be enriched step by step through word association techniques. For this purpose, some handy and easily accessible tools are needed.

Firstly, we need to possess a good dictionary which translates English words into Hindi or one's own mother tongue. Secondly, since we live in the digital era, we need a mobile dictionary app which gives the translation, pronunciation, synonyms, antonyms and grammatical modification of words. These apps are abundantly available on the internet. Along with this, we can also use Google search to aid the vocabulary enrichment process. With these basic tools at hand, we may now approach word association in three ways as follows. Pick up a notebook and create the following per week:

- Cluster Web.
- Character Card.
- Mind Map.

Now let us delve into how each one can be created and what perspective it looks into.

I. Cluster web

A Cluster web associates a comprehensive vocabulary of all physical objects that surround our immediate environment. We need to pick a word first. Think in your own language about all the words that can be related or associated with our chosen word. Then translate those related words into English and create the Cluster web. For instance, I choose the word 'TABLE':

![Cluster Web Diagram]

One can create an elaborate web/list of words associated with table.

Take two pages at a time. On Page 1 write meanings, plurals, opposites, adjectives and verbs associated to the word as the context may be. On Page 2, write meaningful sentences from the information of 'Page 1'.

Now for the speaking practice:

a) Read these words and sentences aloud.

b) Record your spoken words on your phone.

c) Listen to and correct your pronunciation through the mobile app or when you listen to the words while watching your favorite TV show or Radio channel or a live lecture or announcement.

Here is a tentative layout of Page 1 and Page 2.
PAGE 1

Write meaningful sentences from the information of “Page 1“

E.g.:
- I write on my study table
- I play table tennis on my TT table
- I eat my dinner on the dining table

Do the same two-page activity with MIND MAP / CHARACTER CARD.

Just like you chose the word 'TABLE' choose a second word for the week and follow the same process. These objects are inanimate but make the part and parcel of one's daily life; Practice with words like Computer, Room, Kitchen, Road, Canteen, Store, Gym, Parlor, library, restaurant, station and so on. The more familiar we become with our physical surroundings, the more confidence we gain to describe a situation.

II. Character card

The Cluster Web above deals with the physical aspects of life. Now, we move from the inanimate to the animate. A famous quote says 'No man is an Island'. Every person needs to associate and depend on other people in order to survive. Hence, arises the need to create a pen picture of the people we associate with in our everyday lives. A Character Card is a cluster web of the traits and attributes of a person or a living being. Character attributes go deeper than merely physical traits, hence, the descriptive vocabulary becomes more intense and explorative. Begin by writing the qualities of yourself and move on to all the people and persons you relate yourself to occasionally or regularly come in contact with, and of those who affect you even at a distance. Again, repeat the same process. Think about the qualities and the words which you use for the person in your own language and then
proceed to translate them in English language that you are learning. For instance

Create Character cards for your parents, relatives, friends, helpers and mentors. Their positives, negatives, physical attributes, qualities and attitudes. An interesting way is to stick the picture of the person in the center. Very soon, through constant practice, one can delve into a sea of interesting vocabulary that pinpoints a person’s personality.

III. Mind Map

For the new entrant at the higher education level, the exposure to new issues, events and lifestyles may sometimes cast an indelible impression on the formative minds. College life is a hotbed for new trends, opinions and further courses of action in one’s life journey. Long lasting mental impressions are created as the windows of the mind are open to receive fresh ideas. Here, the mind map comes handy.

This is a cluster web based on an issue, event or celebrity at its core. Another new set of vocabulary describes such aspects. To formulate your opinions, you can choose from an elaborate variety - your favorite movie, book, student leaders, games, sports heroes, artificial intelligence, gym, junk food, dream careers and so forth. For instance

If earnestly practiced and if only three words are picked per week to create each type of web, one can dive deep into the vocabulary sea. Sentences through connecting words can follow suit, thus laying building blocks of language expression. Further meaningful sentences with a central idea tie up to create the paragraphs, which form the basic structure of long writing skills.

The second creative, hands on and enriching group activity is Newsletter Creation. It is a great opportunity of showcasing one’s specialized skill, expression and proactive communication. The very basis of a newsletter is creating an instrument to reach out, give opinions and initiate creativity
of the written expression. It is a group activity and targets students who are proficient in handling language.

Within a group of four to six students, first the leader or the editor is to be selected, who has to judiciously hand over the various sections of the newsletter to fellow classmates or team members according to their ability and skill.

A newsletter at the college level can be subdivided into a variety of perspectives or sections.

These may be:

a) College, University and Inter-University events. A brief coverage with pictures. Here one reporter and one photographer will do the job. The reporter should be well versed to briefly describe the when, where, who, sequence and conclusion of the event and the student photographer should be able to take clear well-defined pictures. This is very good initiative to rudimentary writing skills. College festivals, sports, guest lectures, seminars, visits, trips etc can be covered in this section. Once the material is collected, it has to be systematically arranged in a chronological order and fit into the page and word limits, which is an exhaustive job for a reporter and the Editor or Editorial Board.

b) Interview Section - College students have their own set of celebrities and heroes. This section will pose live interviews with achievers in the diverse fields, be it academic, sports, co-curricular fields and alumni who have made it big. Questionnaires need to be prepared which are specific to the person who is being interviewed. The interviewer should have proficient spoken skills and a recording must be made to decipher the answers in future and put them into print. Once again, the editorial team will select snippets appropriate to the page space.

c) Literary Section - This section includes a collection of literary contributions and can be bilingual. All the budding writers, poets and story tellers of the college can contribute towards this elaborate section. Recipes, jokes and anecdotes can be added for spice. The whole editorial team is responsible for collecting and editing this interesting piece of the newsletter without hurting the sentiments of the contributors.

d) The design or artistic creativity section - Some students are potential artists. They can create lovely borders and page setting designs. Some can create beautiful pictures and monograms, expressive drawings and even cartoons. All these abilities need to be tapped, because the final structural beauty of the Newsletter is in the hands of these new artists.
Along with above, an appropriate title, editorial and a page and time limit has to be set. But this group activity pays wonderful dividends in terms of tapping innovative and procreative abilities of the students, if carried out as a hands-on experience in an enthusiastic spirit.

Discussion
The social work curriculum has opportunities to learn and improve in language. Students of some universities have to submit all written and oral assignments in English only. In other universities students can be encouraged to practice English language for their submissions. This will give them practice in learning the language. The social work students through their field work reports, the theory assignments and the group conference paper and recording of the minutes of the group conference can utilize these opportunities to excel in the language learning.

IV. CONCLUSION
Communication skills are very important to be an effective social worker. Within communication it is equally important how do we present ourselves or our work orally and in written documents. Thus, we need to enhance our writing skills. Before writing comes reading, so individuals must work on reading and writing skills to improve themselves as individuals in the job market. Those who are able to do good report writing, recording, documentation and presentation they would be able to earn a higher position in the organization. English language is the second language to many in India. There are ways and methods to improve the language command of individuals. This article was an attempt to help enhance the reading and writing skills of students and professional.

V. REFERENCES