

Identifying the Levels of English Language Writing Skills of MBA Students

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Abstract

The identification process of the different levels of writing skills is a constituent and important step in researching writing skills. Though it is a step in the process of researching writing skills, this identification in itself is a process as it involves multiple steps. In this research study, these steps include the identification of the research topic, research problem, and target participants, selecting of a measurement scale, constructing an instrument, administering the instrument to collect the data, evaluating the answer scripts, awarding the marks, and analysing the scores along with deciding the level. In this research paper, the target participants are MBA students. It is a sincere effort to illustrate the identification process of the writing skills of MBA students. The study aims to facilitate prospective research scholars in this domain of researching writing. The study is based primarily on the experience of data collected from the field.

Key Words: Language, MBA Students, Process, Researching Writing, Teaching Writing

1. Introduction

Researching writing is a specialised domain in the field of ELT research. As writing is one of the most complex of all language skills only a few researchers try to attempt researching writing. Researching writing is a set of many sub-processes. One of these sub-processes is identifying the levels of writing skills. The process of identifying the levels of writing skills of MBA students is a step-by-step process. This research study is an attempt to explain the nuances of the measurement of writing skills of MBA students in general and identify their level of writing skills in particular. The research study describes the practical execution of the steps in the field, involved in the process of identifying the levels of writing skills of MBA

students. The research study provides an answer to the research question: how to identify the levels of English language writing skills of MBA students.

The nature of the present research study is descriptive. The study is based on both the primary and secondary sources. The primary source of this paper is the practical experience of collecting data from the field. This research study of identifying the levels of English language writing skills of MBA students can be conducted on any population following the steps discussed in the research study.

2. Research process

Research is the process of being involved in activities from the beginning of the identification of a research problem to the end of obtaining results and drawing conclusions. In the words of Kothari (2004), "Research process consists of series of actions or steps necessary to effectively carry out research and the desired sequencing of these steps" (p.10). Similarly Kumar (2014) in his book "Research Methodology" compared the research process with a journey, which involves the starting point, the route and the destination. In the same way, a research process too follows certain steps systematically and scientifically. Further, he described the research process as an eight-step model. These steps are incorporated into three stages or phases. These stages are as follows:

First Stage—Selecting a topic for research

- 1st Step – Formulation of a research problem

Second Stage—Arranging a research investigation

- 2nd Step - Selection of a research design
- 3rd Step - Construction of research tools for data collection
- 4th Step - Sample selection
- 5th Step - preparing a draft of the research proposal

Third Stage—Carrying out a study

- 6th Step - Collection of data
- 7th Step - Data analysis and presentation of results
- 8th Step - preparing a draft of the research report (Kumar, 2014, p.23-27)

2.1 Research approaches

In the field of research, there exist three major approaches to research. The three major approaches of research are the quantitative approach, the qualitative approach, and the mixed methods approach. The quantitative approach entails the collection of quantitative data that can be analysed by rigorous quantitative analysis in an established and rigid manner. On the other hand, the qualitative research approach is concerned with the subjective evaluation of attitudes, opinions, and behaviour. The distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches lies in the fact that the quantitative approach relies on numbers, and calculations and the qualitative approach is about words.

A third approach called the mixed method approach is also in existence. According to Creswell (2014), it is an approach or method of investigation that entails gathering both qualitative and quantitative data, combining the two kinds of data. And using original designs that could incorporate theoretical frameworks and philosophical presumptions. In this approach a combination of various methods of both quantitative and qualitative approaches are used so therefore, this approach is known as the mixed methods approach.

2.2 The domain of research on writing skills

Writing is an essential skill in the field of English language acquisition despite the fact, that students are still lagging in this skill. Advocating the importance of writing Brown (2004) states, "Today, the ability to write has become an indispensable skill in our global literate community. Writing skill, at least at rudimentary levels, is a necessary condition for achieving employment in many walks of life and is simply taken for granted in literate cultures" (p.218). Furthermore, data consistently indicate that the

students of English as a Second Language (ESL) at all levels perform worse in writing than in any other domain. It is the last domain of second language acquisition to be fully developed (Cole & Feng, 2015). Likewise, Bouzar (2021) opines, "Research in the field of writing revealed that this skill is very complex as it encompasses a multitude of processes to reach the final product. It is not a mere representation of ideas, but it is the exhibition of multiple processes in which the writer gets involved namely cognition, problem-solving and social connection" (p.2).

The above statements of the researchers show the importance of writing as a skill and its complex nature. The complexity of writing skills prompted researchers to explore the domain of researching writing and find solutions to the existing problems of learners of second language writing.

2.3 Measurement of writing skills

A typical research process consists of identifying the constructs, converting the constructs into variables, measuring the variables, determining the results and compiling the results into the report. Measurement is a crucial aspect of any research process. The act of measurement involves observing and documenting the observations made. Under specific rules, observations can be recorded in the form of numbers, other symbols, or attributes of an object. The attributes of an object (the respondent) include feelings, attitudes, and opinions.

Elaborating the importance of measurement Mexion & Kumar (2020) state, "The most important aspect of measurement is the specification of rules for assigning numbers to characteristics. The rules for assigning numbers should be standardized and applied uniformly. This must not change over time or objects" (p.55).

Measurement is a significant component of any research study. The process of measurement of writing skills is an important aspect of researching writing. In simple terms, it can be stated that to measure any quantity a scale is required. So, therefore, to understand the concept of measurement of writing skills a researcher needs to understand the concept of scaling. It is evident that to select a measurement scale the researcher should be aware of the process of scaling.

2.4 Scaling

Scaling is the process of measuring and assigning numbers to objects based on predefined rules. In other words, Scaling is a method of placing the measured objects on a continuum by assigning the measured objects to a continuous series of numbers. (Mexion & Kumar, 2020). Similarly, Kothari (2004) explains, "Scaling describes the procedures of assigning numbers to various degrees of opinion, attitude and other concepts. This can be done in two ways viz., (i) making a judgement about some characteristic of an individual and then placing him directly on a scale that has been defined in terms of that characteristic and (ii) constructing questionnaires in such a way that the score of individual's responses assigns him a place on a scale" (p.76). The purpose of this brief description and explanation of the process of scaling is to facilitate a researcher in easily understanding the concept and meaning of scaling and effectively using the scaling process in his study.

2.4.1 Types of scale

The clarity in the concept of scaling will help a researcher understand the types of scales used by researchers. There are mainly three types of scales used by the researchers in different situations, as per the needs. The three types of scales include generic, task-specific and genre-specific scales. These three types of scales can be holistic or analytical. Furthermore, Nimehchisalem (2010) states that "Holistic scales follow an almost general impression scoring procedure. The rater reads a script and grades it based on a set of descriptors that evaluate the writing performance" (p.236). He further added an analytical scale to investigate a written piece of work in terms of distinct writing construct dimensions such as content, organisation, and language control. The understanding and clarity of holistic and analytical dimensions of scales help a researcher in identifying a suitable scale to conduct a study.

3. MBA programmes and written communication

Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes prepare candidates for various job roles in different sectors. The MBA programme imparts training on various aspects of business and personality. These programmes are meant for the growth of skills in students required for completing the MBA programme and to be future managers. One of the most desirable skills required to be a successful MBA student and an efficient manager is communication skills. Communication skills play an important role in every job role in the field of business administration. Communication is broadly divided into verbal and non-verbal communication. Verbal communication includes communicating through words and non-verbal communication includes communication with the help of body language and facial expression. Verbal communication can be classified into oral and written forms of communication. Spoken words are used while communicating orally and written communication takes place through writing.

Oral communication and written communication are important in business but documenting evidence is done majorly in writing. At the same time written communication is referred to and preferred in case of any ambiguity in statements. On the other hand, apart from business requirements MBA students are required academic writing to complete their programme successfully. Al-Badi (2015) pointed out that nobody can deny that academic writing is essential not only for mastering the English language but also for succeeding in other disciplines where English is the primary language of instruction. So it is evident that writing plays an important role in MBA and other business administration programmes.

3.1 Writing challenges and difficulties of MBA students

Research studies consistently show that there are serious concerns with the writing skills of MBA students. This is evident in various studies one such study on MBA students' writing skills was conducted by Kondal (2019) The data analysis has the following revelations:

- 82% of students admitted that they have a problem with the organisation of ideas
- 75% of students accepted that they have grammatical issues in the formation of correct sentences.
- 72% of the students conveyed that they have issues with sentence structure, and they are facing difficulties in subject-verb agreement.
- 89% of students declare that they've had trouble with different aspects of their business writing such as grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, use of general vocabulary instead of business vocabulary, wrong Use of quotation marks, problems with sentence structure, word order and paragraph construction (p.18).

Kondal (2019) further pointed out that the majority of students were unable to produce appropriate write-ups because they were unfamiliar with the proper format and organisation of ideas. The majority of management students were unfamiliar with various genres and writing formats. As a result, they used the incorrect format to convey business communication. Similarly, in another study, Umar et al (2019) reported that:

- 54% of students 'sometimes' face problems with vocabulary. 22% face 'a lot' of difficulties, and 22% 'rarely' face any difficulty in vocabulary.
- 44% of students accepted that they 'sometimes' have problems with generating new ideas, and 34% 'rarely' have any problems.
- 48% of the students conveyed that they 'sometimes' have issues with organising their thoughts, 34% accepted that they 'rarely' have any problem, 12% accepted 'a lot' and 6% said 'never' faced a problem in organising their ideas (p.385).

The data mentioned above is quite significant and indicates the writing issues and challenges faced by MBA students. The current state of writing skills of MBA students points towards the need for enhancement of their writing skills.

There are clear specifications in ELT research for the enhancement of any of the language skills. To enhance or develop a language skill a researcher needs to measure the existing level of that particular skill first. After that, any effort for the enhancement of the skill should be taken. This has been done to facilitate the measurement of the impact of the enhancement efforts.

3.2 Significance of writingskills for MBA students inbusiness administration

Writing originated with the needs of the business rather than the needs of the customers. In a business setup, a person or a business executive provides services to customers as per their requirements. He is not only an executive but also a person who addresses his customer's needs through writing by keeping the following aspects of communication in mind:

- The message should be clear and well-written so that it would be easier for the customer to read and understand.
- The message intends to help the customers and build strong customer relationships ultimately.
- The writing skills help to establish a good and respectful relationship with the customers. It helps the business executive to address his customers directly.

In the twenty-first century, digital marketing is flourishing day by day. At present industries are focusing more on digital marketing and advertising. Several business activities in industries require effective writing skills. Employees with excellent writing skills are preferred by every organisation. These employees having excellent writing skills will help to grow the business of the organisation. Thus, it becomes essential in almost all industries to either have people with effective writing skills or to take measures, to conduct training programs to enhance their writing skills.

4. Teaching of writing

The difficulties of learners in acquiring writing skills are explained by Brown(2004). In a very apt way, he states, "Every educated child in developed countries learns the rudiments of writing in his or her native language, but very few learn to express themselves clearly with a logical, well-developed organization that accomplishes an intended purpose. And yet we expect second language learners to write coherent essays with artfully chosen rhetorical and discourse devices!With such a monumental goal, the job of teaching writing has occupied the attention of papers, articles, dissertations, books, and even separate professional journals exclusively devoted to writing in a second language" (p.218). Brown clearly explained not only the learners' difficulties in acquiring writing skills but also the difficulties of educators in the teaching of writing.

4.1 Role of the teacher

The teacher plays a major role in the development of effective writing skills among MBA students. To gauge the interest of students in English language writing the teacher needs to suggest interesting and current topics this can be done through brainstorming. Once the students identify a suitable topic to write the next step in the development of writing is to facilitate the students in the choice of rich and appropriate vocabulary. This can be done with consistent practice. While writing a text the primary focus of a writer should be on the use of varied grammatical structures rather than the use of monotonous forms in their writing. To fulfil this purpose the teacher should teach various grammatical structures involved in writing an effective text. Similarly, the use of punctuation marks plays an important role in the effectiveness of a piece of writing. The student should master the art of using correct punctuation, with the support of the teacher.

The other important aspects involve a continuous flow of thoughts, linking of ideas coherently, using simple and easy language, adaption of writing suitable to the readers and engaging readers. All these aspects of writing can be learned by MBA students with the guidance of the teacher.

5. The ten-steps model

This section aims to present ten specific steps which act as a guide in the identification process of level of writing skills. The identification process of level of writing can be broadly categorised into ten major steps. These steps include identification of the research topic, research problem, and target participants, selecting a measurement scale, constructing an instrument, administering the instrument to collect the data, evaluating the answer scripts, awarding the marks, and analysing the scores along with deciding the level. The practical nuances involved in these steps are explained and discussed in detail.

• **Step 1 – The identification of the research topic.**

When a researcher or scholar decides to conduct a research study in his research area the first thing he needs to do is to think about a research topic or title. A research topic is the basis of starting a research project. A technique to identify a suitable research topic for one's study is to start with a working title. According to Creswell(2019), "The topic is the subject or subject matter of a proposed study"(p.58). He further suggested writing the title in a few words or writing in short phrases.

• **Step 2 – The identification of the research problem.**

After successfully identifying a research topic the next step in the research process is the identification of a suitable research problem. The research problem must be closely related to the identified research topic. To conduct a research study a researcher needs to identify a significant research problem. A research problem can be identified from the existing problems of the society, the other source of identifying a research problem is going through the available scientific literature. No single research can solve any existing problem in the society. Only a part of the existing problem can be formulated in a successful research problem and research can be conducted to find out the solution to the research problem.

• **Step 3 – The identification of the target population.**

After identifying a suitable research problem and a suitable research topic a researcher needs to identify a target population to conduct the research study. A population is an important aspect of any empirical research as an empirical study requires collecting data from the population. The population consists of participants or respondents who are sources of primary data. The investigator selected MBA students as the population of the present study. There are certain parameters which need to be kept in mind while selecting the population such as whether the participants willing to participate in the study, what is the practical possibility of collecting data with this population and what are the ethical concerns which may hinder the research process ahead. If these points are not taken into consideration before selecting a population, a researcher may not be successful in collecting data

• **Step 4 – Selecting a measurement scale.**

The measurement scale is chosen primarily based on certain specific requirements of the population, among other reasons are technical reasons. However emphasising other than technical reasons Nimehchisalem(2010) opines, "the final decision will depend upon practical issues like the available time, budget and experts to design the instrument, train the raters and rate the scripts, the degree to which the resulting scores are going to be important for the stakeholders, the number of the scripts that need to be scored, the time limit and the like"(p.237). In the above statement, Nimehchisalem mentioned all the aspects that need to be considered while selecting a measurement scale. This gives a clear picture of points to be considered while selecting a measurement scale.

Among the most commonly used scales in the measurement of English language writing skills are the European scale i.e. CEFR(common European framework of reference) and the Canadian scale (Canadian Language Benchmark) Both scales have descriptors for different levels as the key elements. The investigator selected the Canadian scale as it suits the population of the study, the MBA students.

• **Step 5 – Constructing an instrument.**

A research instrument is a tool or device which is meant to collect the data. A research instrument can be constructed or a researcher can use an existing instrument developed by a previous researcher. A research instrument can be in various forms, it can be a questionnaire, a test or both. A research instrument is constructed by employing the measurement scale. The investigator has chosen a diagnostic test as the

instrument to identify the level of writing skills of MBA students. The modified Canadian Scale (Canadian Language Benchmarks) was employed to construct the research instrument.

• **Step 6 – Administering the instrument.**

During the administering step, a researcher has to make all arrangements to conduct the test and collect the data, herein this case the answerscripts. It includes not only conducting tests & collecting data but also first-hand checking of the data that it is complete in all aspects. Sometimes some students forget to fill in their details, sometimes they forget to attempt all questions, and some may remain unattempted. The first-hand checking is to ensure that the data is complete in all respects. If the data isn't complete in all respect then the researcher should try to complete it on the field itself. It is easier to do at the same time than later. In this way, an instrument is administered to the participants in the specified manner.

• **Step 7 – Evaluating the answer scripts.**

The answerscripts collected from the participants are the key dataset, therefore, the evaluation should be done by keeping this fact in mind. To fulfil the purpose of conservation of the data in its original form the evaluation should be done using separate sheets. Thus, the answerscripts should not be checked in original but are evaluated by marking maximum marks allocated to a question and marks obtained in that question separately. After allotting marks to each question a total of all questions should be calculated and a score is assigned to each answerscript. In this way, scores are calculated. These scores will be used further to identify the level.

• **Step 8 – Assigning the marks.**

Assignment of marks to each candidate is an important aspect of this research process. Based on the evaluation of answerscripts marks are to be awarded to each answerscript. If a test is an instrument for collecting data, as in the case of the investigator, the maximum marks in the test must be out of 100. If a researcher is using a test with maximum marks of less than 100 the researcher has to adjust the marks so that it becomes 100 (for example if the maximum marks are 50 they must be doubled). In any case, the calculation should be based on 100 marks. For calculation percentage is the simplest form of analysis therefore, the maximum marks allotted must be 100.

• **Step 9 – Analysing the scores.**

Scores are important in the process of identification of levels of writing skills amongst MBA students. Scores should not be assigned on the answersheet but a separate sheet must be used while evaluating the answerscripts. To elaborate, the researcher should not allot marks to the answerscript itself. The marks should be written and calculated on a separate sheet, to determine the score. This method of calculation is known as coding. Coding must be used in all these processes to address ethical concerns. Coding is used in the evaluation of answerscript. Coding can be done in different ways a simple example of coding to obtain the scores is as follows:

S.No. or {Code} of the candidate = ---, S.No. of the question = ----, Maximum marks = ---, Marks obtained = ---, total marks of the candidate = ---.

• **Step 10 – Deciding the level.**

There are twelve levels in the existing Canadian scale, the investigator modified the existing scale to suit the population of the study. Levels can be identified based on the descriptors of the levels. Descriptors of different levels have major significance in the process of identifying different levels of writing skills. The research instruments are constructed by employing the descriptors, either in direct or indirect form. By keeping the descriptors of the Canadian scale in mind, the investigator has allotted 20 marks to each level. This means if a participant obtains marks between 1 to 20 he is placed in level one. If a participant obtains between 21 to 40 he is placed in level two and if a participant obtains marks between 41 to 60 he is placed in level three. Likewise, the level is determined based on marks obtained by the participant in the test.

6. Conclusion

To sum up it can be said that the identification process of the different levels of writing skills of MBA students is an intensive task which involves consistent and meticulous efforts. The knowledge of the practical nuances of this identification process of the different levels of writing skills facilitates a researcher to perform it effectively. The Ten-step model suggested above makes it convenient for a researcher or scholar to attempt this process and complete it smoothly. The present research article is based on practical experience of identifying the levels of writing skill, which is one of the constituent sub-processes of researching writing skills. The suggestion by the investigator to the future researchers is to conduct similar studies on other sub-processes.

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