

**ENHANCING WRITING SKILL OF TERTIARY-LEVEL RURAL LEARNERS THROUGH
MOBILE APP – AN ACTION RESEARCH**

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ABSTRACT:

Writing is a difficult skill to acquire, even for a native speaker of any language. It is even more difficult to acquire it in a second language. Undoubtedly, teaching and training of learners in English language Writing is one of the most challenging tasks for language teachers even in a conventional teaching and learning environment. One could imagine the level of difficulty in teaching Writing skill online. Covid19 pandemic has thrown a great challenge to the teaching community in general and language teachers, in particular to adapt to this changing times. The entire education system is in the crossroads. Given the Indian rural background, teaching and learning of English (ESL) especially, Writing skill is a daunting task. The researcher, an English language teacher at the tertiary-level, was forced to move from offline to online teaching due to the lockdown. The researcher found it very hard to impart Writing skill in English to around 20 rural learners in the class. Several mobile Apps were tried out and finally, the researcher identified ‘IELTS Prep Mobile App’ to be tried out in an action research. This mobile application is user friendly; allows instant access for free practice tests, prompts grammar tips, conducts exercises, quizzes along with sample questions. The four-month long action research provided the researcher with lots of new learning and experience. The lesson learnt from this effective action research could be very useful to language teachers in similar situations. This paper also highlights the processes involved in identification and analysis of problems in writing skill of the target population and the appropriate strategy employed to overcome the identified problems deploying the mobile app.

Keywords

Pandemic, Tertiary Education, Online Learning, Writing Skill, IELTS prep mobile app, Action research.

INTRODUCTION:

Covid-19, a novel coronavirus, has made our society to isolate from each other with mask. Many countries decided to close educational institutions to protect the learners from the viral exposure. Hence, the completion of the prescribed syllabi was difficult in the stipulated timeline of the academic calendar. The pandemic situation caused inconvenience almost in all professions and especially, in the education field. Teaching and learning have become a nightmare to almost all academicians and learners. The higher education system in any nation today seeks a relook. Higher education institutions and learners must cope with online teaching aids and it remains a big challenge during COVID-19 (Bao, 2020). COVID-19 enforced the academic higher education universities across the globe to cancel the traditional chalk and talk (in class, face-to-face education) methodology and change to the online teaching/learning (Bao, 2020; Dilucca et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). This has made all the teachers and learners face many difficulties in teaching and learning. Particularly, the language teachers face many difficulties in handling the subject. Learners who have proper internet access may study, for others it’s a difficult task (Ary & Brune, 2011). There may be many advantages and disadvantages of online classes for both faculties and learners. For teachers, online classes are a new method of teaching with access to advanced tools and techniques involved in it and can reach many learners (Appana, 2020). On the contrary, the student can acquire knowledge by using different online tools and methods, pay much attention to recorded/live conversations of world-class professionals, listen and watch classes many times and working at their promptness (Arkorful&Abaidoo, 2015). There are many sources available to get educated but at this

time ICT (Information and Communication Technology) is a real boon. Online teaching has become a saviour to all the academician and learners. In this inevitable pandemic situation and digital scenario, the researcher introduced the rural learners to a user-friendly mobile app, developed by the British Council, called 'IELTS Prep Application'. This research concentrated only on enhancing the writing skill of the tertiary-level rural learners. Through the mobile application, the researcher taught and evaluated writing skill of the above-mentioned target population (TP). It resulted in a significant improvement in the particular skill of the learners.

REASON TO SELECT WRITING SKILL:

There are four basic language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) in every language. In these four skills, listening and reading are the 'Receptive Skills' while speaking and writing are 'Productive Skills'. All the language learners should improve these skills and the teaching of the second language should also incorporate activities related to these skills. Among these, writing skill is very important, because of its ability to express in symbols is difficult to acquire even for native speakers; more so for second language learners. In general, writing skill exposes one's ability in a particular language, to exhibit knowledge, understanding and analytical skills.

Usually, people speak more than what they write and only few people are capable of good writing. In the present age, people enjoy the writings of so many scholars and derive pleasure out of them. People admire the language of those writings too. Writing is a flow of reading habits. To write a single line, the writer has to read hundreds of lines. So, the researcher concentrates on new ways of enhancing writing skill during this pandemic situation, in this research.

IELTS PREP APPLICATION:

IELTS Prep Application, is a mobile application that can be downloaded from the Google play store for android. It is user-friendly; allows instant access for free practice tests, prompts grammar tips, conducts exercises, quizzes and provides sample questions.

Top Features:

1. Comprehensive overview of the IELTS tests
 - Practice Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking skills with expert tools
2. Free practice tests
 - Prepare for the types of questions you will find in the tests
3. Grammar exercises
 - Improve your understanding of tenses and other key English grammar, track your progress with quizzes

Aim

This study aims to enhance writing skill of tertiary-level learners online and evaluate its effectiveness. This research adopts the experimental method.

Significance

It's expected that the findings of this research could help the language instructors, research scholars, L2 (Second Language) learners and the syllabus designers for online mode.

Hypothesis

The tertiary-level learners could enhance their writing skill online, using the Mobile Application, IELTS Prep App.

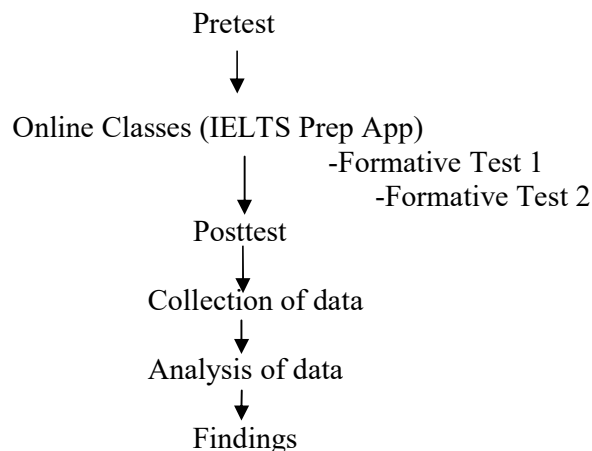
Flow Chart of the Research Design

Placement Test (Class tests & Internal Assessment)



Selecting Random Samples





METHODOLOGY:

The researcher has used Hypothesis Testing Random Method for this action research. Totally twenty learners took part in this experimental study. These learners were from 1st year B. A. English Literature, Sacred Heart College, Tirupattur Dt., Tamil Nadu, India. From their performance in the class tests and other internal assessments, the researcher selected these twenty learners. Though these learners are from different backgrounds, they were from rural areas. From their test papers, the researcher identified that, they had little knowledge of grammar and they were not sure of tenses, parts of speech, subject-verb agreement and the sentence pattern. The researcher conducted a pretest after the selection of the twenty learners.

The researcher instructed all the learners to download the IELTS prep mobile application from Google play store for free and register themselves with their mail IDs and phone number. After the registration, the learners had to study 'English Fundamental' in the app. They attended only the writing part in the application; they had to attend the tests to complete the course. Once they completed the 'English Fundamental', they had to complete the 'Practice Test' in writing. It normally takes two to three weeks to complete these courses and practice tests. Formative tests were conducted by the researcher to test their improvement at the weekends. Learners had to report to the researcher after the completion of every course and test. Finally, the posttest was conducted by the researcher.

ANALYSIS:

The data of the pretest, formative test and posttest were collected. These scores showed a gradual progress of the learners' writing skill in the target language.

Table: 1.1. Learners' Mark List

Learners' Mark List					
S.No	Reg.No	Pretest/20	Formative test 1/20	Formative test 2/20	Post test/20
1	AU201102	14	15	16	18
2	AU201104	8	10	10	11
3	AU201106	7	8	10	9
4	AU201108	10	10	12	10
5	AU201110	11	8	10	12
6	AU201112	13	10	12	14
7	AU201114	14	11	13	18
8	AU201117	8	10	9	8
9	AU201121	12	15	13	16
10	AU201122	10	11	10	11

11	AU201124	6	8	7	8
12	AU201129	9	11	12	11
13	AU201134	10	12	13	12
14	AU201143	8	10	11	10
15	AU201148	9	10	8	10
16	AU201150	10	12	11	11
17	AU201155	7	10	9	12
18	AU201164	10	13	11	11
19	AU201168	13	14	14	17
20	AU201170	11	13	12	15

The table 1.1 gives the complete picture of the marks scored by the learners in pretest, formative tests and posttest. From the given scores, the analysis was carried out.

PRETEST:

The Pretest was conducted for the TP to know their entry-level proficiency in writing skill. The pretest was conducted before the start of the online class in the IELTS prep App. The mark scored by the TP is presented in the table below and diagrammatically represented in figure 1.1.

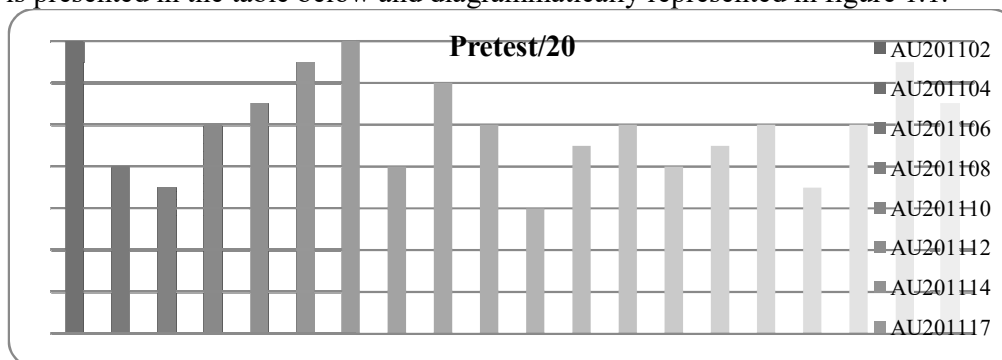


Figure 1.1: The Marks of the pretest

Table: 1.2 Percentage of Pretest

Marks Range	Frequency (No of Learners)	%
0 to 5	0	0
6 to 10	13	65
11 to 15	7	35
16 to 20	0	0

From the Table 1.2., it is seen that no learners have scored in the range of 0-5 marks. It is also observed that 65 percent (13 out of 20) have scored in the range of 6-10 marks. Also, 35 percent (7 out of 20 learners) have scored in the range of 11-15 marks. It is important to remember that no learners have scored in the range of 16-20 marks. From the table, it is very obvious that 13 out of 16 learners have scored below 10 marks out of 20. This shows that a vast majority of TP possesses a very low level of proficiency in their writing skills at the entry-level of the study.

POSTTEST:

The posttest was conducted at the end of the intervention period to identify the improvement achieved in their writing skill of the learners (after the period of the online classes through the IELTS prep App). The marks scored by the learners show a definite progress. The analysis is given below:

Table1.3: Percentage of Posttest

Marks Range	Frequency (No of Learners)	%
0 to 5	0	0
6 to 10	6	30
11 to 15	10	50
16 to 20	4	20

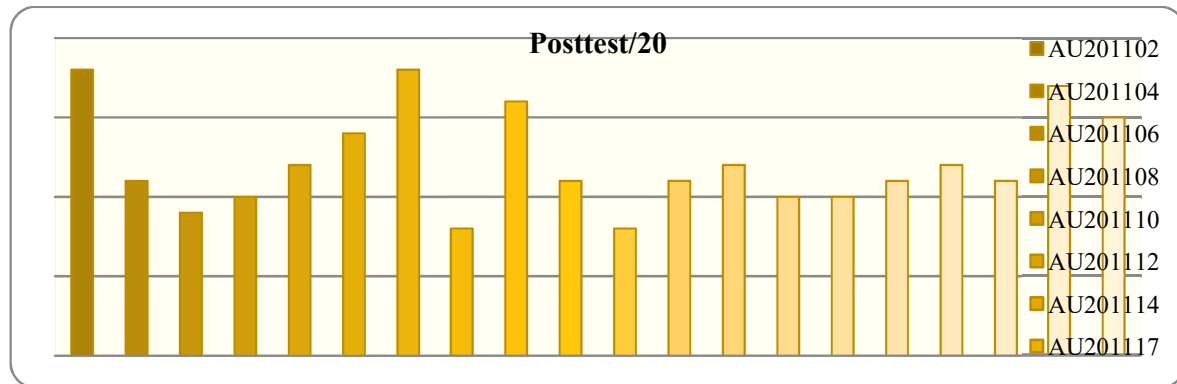


Figure 1.3: The Marks of Posttest

From the Table 1.3., it is seen that no learners have scored less than 5 marks. It is also observed that 30 percent (6 out of 20 learners) have scored in the range of 6 - 10 marks. It is also observed that 50 percent (10 out of 20 learners) have scored in the range of 11 – 15 marks. Also, 20 percent (4 out of 20 learners) have scored in the range of 16 – 20 marks. Also, the table shows that more than 14 learners out of 20 have scored in the range of 11 - 20 marks. This shows that the vast majority of the learners' proficiency in their writing skills has improved at the end of the online learning through the IELTS prep app.

During the treatment of errors in writing, two formative tests were conducted. A total of three weeks were spent on the intervention. The two formative tests helped the researcher to monitor the learners' understanding and progress in the skills acquired through the app. This continuous assessment favored the researcher to monitor the learners' attentiveness and interest in online learning. The marks obtained in the two formative tests are presented in the Table 1.1.

This analysis of pretest and posttest scores demonstrates the progress achieved in the writing of the TP. The difference between the pretest and posttest indicates the total percentage of progress made in writing skills.

Table 1.4: Analysis of Posttest and Pretest Data

S. No	Reg. No	Pretest/20	Post test/20	% of Pretest	% of Posttest	% of total difference
1	AU201102	14	18	70	90	20
2	AU201104	8	11	40	55	15
3	AU201106	7	9	35	45	10
4	AU201108	10	10	50	50	0
5	AU201110	11	12	55	60	5
6	AU201112	13	14	65	70	5
7	AU201114	14	18	70	90	20

8	AU201117	8	8	40	40	0
9	AU201121	12	16	60	80	20
10	AU201122	10	11	50	55	5
11	AU201124	6	8	30	40	10
12	AU201129	9	11	45	55	10
13	AU201134	10	12	50	60	10
14	AU201143	8	10	40	50	10
15	AU201148	9	10	45	50	5
16	AU201150	10	11	50	55	5
17	AU201155	7	12	35	60	25
18	AU201164	10	11	50	55	5
19	AU201168	13	17	65	85	20
20	AU201170	11	15	45	75	30
				49.50%	61%	11.50%

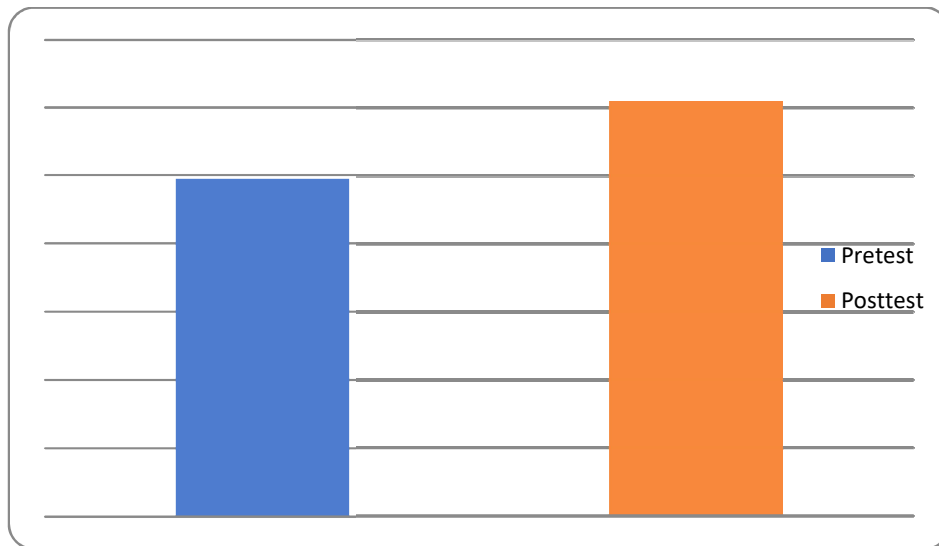


Figure 1.4: Comparison of Pretest and Posttest

From the table 1.4., it is seen that most of the learners have progressed in their writing proficiency in the range of 1to 25 percent. One student has scored between 25 to 50 percentages; there are no learners who have regressed from their entry-level of the study. So, the majority of the TP has enhanced their proficiency in writing skill.

The gain ratio helps the researcher to find out the progress made by the experimental group of learners after the intervention. The Gain Ratio is calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Gain Ratio} = \left\{ \frac{\text{Posttest score} - \text{Pretest score}}{\text{Maximum possible score} - \text{pretest score}} \right\} \times 100$$

Table 1.5: The Average Gain Ratio

S. No	Reg. No	Pretest/20	Post	Gain
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			test/20	Ratio
1	AU201102	14	18	66.66
2	AU201104	8	11	25
3	AU201106	7	9	15.38
4	AU201108	10	10	0
5	AU201110	11	12	11.11
6	AU201112	13	14	14.28
7	AU201114	14	18	66.66
8	AU201117	8	8	0
9	AU201121	12	16	50
10	AU201122	10	11	10
11	AU201124	6	8	14.28
12	AU201129	9	11	18.18
13	AU201134	10	12	20
14	AU201143	8	10	16.66
15	AU201148	9	10	9.09
16	AU201150	10	11	10
17	AU201155	7	12	38.46
18	AU201164	10	11	10
19	AU201168	13	17	57.14
20	AU201170	11	15	44.44
Average gain ratio				24.86

So, 24.86 percent is the mean gain ratio achieved because of the intervention strategy by the TP as seen from the table 1.5. The analysed score establishes that an average of 11.5 percent (Table 1.4) progress in their writing skills has been achieved in the TP. The mean values and gain ratio calculated confirm the definite progress achieved in the TP.

FINDINGS:

The research on enhancement of the writing skills through the online mobile application was experimented with twenty learners. In this research, 24.86 percent (Table 1.4) of gain ratio has been achieved in learners' writing skill. The mean pretest value of the TP is 49.50 percent (Table 1.4). After the pretest, during the online teaching and learning, the learners were continuously monitored by the researcher with the help of formative tests. Posttest was conducted after the intervention classes; in the posttest, the overall percentage of scores obtained by TP is 61 percent (Table 1.4). These values indicate a definite progress of the TP during the intervention period. The mean value of the progress achieved is 11.5 percent (Table 1.4).

TESTING OF HYPOTHESIS:

Hypothesis: *The tertiary-level learners could enhance their writing skill online, using the Mobile Application, IELTS Prep App.*

As anticipated in the hypothesis statement, the analysis of the data collected from the current study clearly reveals that the learners have enhanced their writing skill through the use of the IELTS prep mobile application. As presented in Table 1.4., the improvement achieved during the intervention (between the posttest and pretest) is calculated to be 11.50 percent. Given the type of learners, their rural background, duration of the intervention and the high-quality language standards of the IELTS Prep App, an improvement of 11.50 percent is rather significant. The same is doubly confirmed in

the calculated mean gain ratio, as presented in the Table 1.5., which is 24.86 percent. Thus, the proposed hypothesis of this study is proved right and hence accepted.

CONCLUSION:

In India, especially, the rural learners have the potential to learn even during this pandemic situation. This is true also for language. The teachers of a second language are not familiar and do not have experience in teaching language online. The school learners, especially, from vernacular media are made to study the second language as a subject and not as a skill; they are trained for scoring high marks. When they come to higher education, the medium of instruction is English, in general. In this situation, learners feel difficult and inferior in learning the subjects due to lack of English proficiency. This happens mainly in rural India.

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has made several arrangements, including online portals and educational channels through Direct to Home TV, Radios for learners to continue learning during this pandemic. During the lockdown, learners use popular social media tools like WhatsApp, Zoom, Google meet, Telegram, Youtube live, Facebook live, etc., for online teaching-learning systems. ICT initiative of MHRD (e- Broucher- <https://mhrd.gov.in/ict-initiatives>) is a unique platform that combines all digital resources for online education. Even after many initiatives of the government and the educational institutions, the interest of the learners towards online learning is still very poor. It's sad that quite a number of the learners attend the class for attendance and not for learning.

In this situation, it is the teachers' responsibility to make the learners alive and participate actively in the online classes. The same applies for the second language teachers. With a large number of learners in a class, it could be a challenging task for second language teachers to teach languages. So, our teaching and evaluating process could also include some online mobile applications, which are time-tested. In this current action research, the researcher used the IELTS prep application, developed by the British Council. It is a standard free mobile application that is commonly used by the aspirants of IELTS/TOEFL exams. But, this application could be deployed to enhance the English language skills too; as proved in the current study, validating the proposed hypothesis. This study has been done with just 20 learners for a shorter duration of time. Hence, the researcher recommends that similar studies could be undertaken with larger populations, longer durations and learners from different backgrounds. Such studies could further strengthen the validity of the current research.

It is proved that to enhance the writing skill of tertiary level learners, online learning through the IELTS prep mobile application could be used. The teacher needs to motivate the learners and create proper interest in the learners with clear objectives. There are umpty numbers of free and paid Applications available online. The educators need to screen them and evaluate their suitability for their wards. Every unfortunate situation throws up opportunities as well. The researcher feels that such an opportunity has been seized and a positive learning achieved. The researcher too believes that sharing such an experience would benefit many researchers and practitioners in the field of language teaching.

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