

ESL Academic Writing: Perceptions of Post-Graduate Learners of Arunachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to investigate the perceptions of postgraduate learners in Arunachal Pradesh towards academic writing. Many studies show that L2 writers face varying degrees of difficulty coping with the writing demands at higher educational institutions. A preliminary study was conducted in this regard in the three premier institutes of Arunachal Pradesh located in the state capital, Itanagar. A questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore the learners' perceptions of academic writing. The results suggest that, in spite of positive attitudes and awareness of the integrative and instrumental orientation of academic writing skills, the majority of the learners lack proficiency in academic writing. Majority of them wanted an academic writing course to be included in the university course curriculum.

Keywords: Academic Writing, ESL (English as Second Language), Post-Graduate Learners

Introduction

Academic writing is an integral and indispensable part of higher education chiefly at the postgraduate level of studies. Academic writing refers to the forms of expository, argumentative and analytical writing used by university learners and researchers to convey a body of information about a particular subject using a particular style of expression (Wikipedia). In simple terms, academic writing can be defined as a “means of documenting and communicating scientific knowledge” (Monipally and Pawar 2010, p.4). Most forms of academic writing require a detached and objective approach. The arguments in it appeal to logic and provide evidence in support of an intellectual position (Fitzmaurice and O’Farell, p.6). Hyland (2002) sees academic writing as “a variety of subject-specific literacies, through these literacies members of disciplines communicate with their peers and students with their professors” (p.352). Writing skills determine student’s academic literacy; this can be surmised in the claims of Bjork and Raisanen (2006), they who opines writing as a thinking tool for language development, for critical thinking and for learning in all disciplines (p.8). Further, it leverages

cognitive abilities and facilitates rhetorical socialization of students (Hyland 2002, Bjork and Raisanen 2006, Jordan 2012, Flowerdew and Peacock 2001).

Post graduate students are expected to possess academic writing skills to fulfill the requirements of university course curriculum. Meeting these expectations and academic standards at this level of study is a daunting task. Poor language proficiency among them and lack of intervention measures at the institutes have been at the root of learners’ academic writing problems. As a result, the students of Arunachal Pradesh are unable to explore themselves to their fullest potential.

Background

Arunachal Pradesh is a multi-ethnic state without a common native language, where each tribe speaks its own mother tongue. In the last four decades, a non-native variety of Hindi flourished in the state, replacing NEFAmese (Creolized Assamese) as the link language (Barthakur 2014, p.179). ELT in Arunachal started in 1972; the year it attained union territory status with the inception of English as the medium of instruction

in the schools right from the primary level. ELT in the state witnessed a short-lived impetus in the 80's under the aegis of CIEFL and NCERT in providing teachers training in English language teaching. This visionary effort is attributed to R.N. Haldipur, the second Lieutenant Governor of the then North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). This collaboration led to the production of textbooks for class I to III based on socio-cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh (Mundayoor 2011). However, for some unknown reasons this significant initiative was discontinued. This initiative, had it continued, would have to a significant extent elevated English education in the rural primary schools of the state.

The current situation of ELT in Arunachal Pradesh has not improved much, especially in government educational institutions, since teachers still largely prefer using Hindi as the language of classroom instruction in schools. Studies reveal the inefficacy of grammar-translation methods largely adopted in rural and suburban schools in imparting English language skills to the learners (Choudhury 2021, p.334). With one of the largest concentrations of tribal population, without a script and written literature, the impact of language anxiety on students is severe as compared to other states of the region (Barthakur 2014, p.179). One of the significant impacts of the state's multilingualism on English education is that many learners exhibit a strong "phonological influence of mother tongues, the verbatim transcription of it can be observed in spoken as well as written forms" of English (Azu 2013, p.669).

(ESL) Post Graduate Academic Writing

Universities and higher technical institutes are the places where learners are exposed to different kinds of academic writing that are variegated across disciplines. Academic writing is crucial for growth and enrichment of important skills to be able to lead a successful life after the completion of studies. Academic writing in university is not only a testing tool to award grades but also a means to enhance subject knowledge and linguistic skills (Bjork and Raisanen 2006, p. 16). Learners at this stage are likely to have developed advanced language proficiency in

English since they have attained several years of formal education in school and college. Acquiring writing skills in the target language is a vital part of learning a second language and it is expected to be mastered by the learners by the time they reach university. But, it is observed that generally a large chunk of learners lack the language skills required to write a good academic piece even at this level.

One of the major issues regarding academic writing is that learners in Arunachal Pradesh are not taught L2 academic writing explicitly. The instructions provided at universities to post graduate learners prioritize structural and technical aspects of research papers without thorough emphasis on imparting overall linguistic and stylistics skills. In addition, no effective measures are adopted in the courses offered to mend the gap among ESL learners in academic writing. Thus, both context and insufficiency of English language proficiency compounds the academic writing problems experienced by ESL learners at postgraduate studies.

The present paper has been developed and guided by the following research questions:

1. What are post graduate ESL learners' perceptions of the importance of academic writing?
2. What are post graduate ESL learners' perceptions of their proficiency in academic writing skills?
3. What are the post graduate ESL learners' perceptions of difficulties of academic writing?

Participant Background

The target population of the study comprised the third semester postgraduate students of the batch 2020-2021 from the three premier institutes of Arunachal Pradesh viz. Rajiv Gandhi Central University (RGU), Doimukh, North Eastern Regional Institute of Science and Technology (NERIST), Nirjuli and National Institute of Technology (NIT), Itanagar. The focus was on courses offering both miniscule and extended academic writing assignments in the forms of field report/survey, project, master's dissertation and thesis as a mandatory course requirement for the successful completion of post graduate degree.

Accordingly, from these three institutes, 31 courses were chosen: M.A (10 courses), M.Sc. (09 courses), M. Tech (08 courses), MBA (02), M.Com (01) and MCA (01).

Survey Tools

This study is founded on the learners' perceptions of academic writing; the data was collected through a structured questionnaire survey and a semi-structured interview with the subjects. Convenience sampling of non-probability sampling methods was used for the study.

1. Questionnaire (See Appendix)

A close-ended questionnaire was prepared based on the review of related literature; several items in the questionnaire have been adapted from studies on academic writing in EFL and ESL context (Cai 2013, ESLP 82: self assessment of English writing skills). The questionnaire was administered to fifteen students from each department constituting a total sample size of 465 students, out of which 414 responses were recorded (Table 1).

The introductory part of the questionnaire sought personal information of the respondents, followed by information on medium of instruction at the three levels of formal education. The questionnaire consisted of eight questions, of which, seven questions were constructed in the form of a 5-point likert scale and the last question in a dichotomous scale. Section I consisted of three questions arranged in a general to specific. Question 1 assessed the learners' perceived importance of general L2 proficiency. Question 2 assessed how they viewed writing skills in comparison to the other three skills. Question 3 investigated their motivations (orientation/purposes) for developing academic writing. In section II, the first item (Q. 4) investigated the learners' perceived writing competence. The second item (Q.5) assessed their perceived proficiency in academic writing. In section III, the first item (Q.6) examined the learners' difficulties at the three essential components of writing. The second item (Q.7) investigated their assessment of difficulties at the skills involved in writing. The third item (Q.8), enquired on the necessity of an academic writing course in the post graduate course curriculum.

Table 1: Survey population and no. of responses recorded

Institute	No. of Courses	Administered	Responses Received	%
Rajiv Gandhi University (RGU)	18	270	254	94%
North Eastern Regional Institute of Science and Technology (NERIST)	08	120	105	87.5%
National Institute of Technology (NIT)	05	75	55	73%
Total	31	465	414	89%

2. Semi Structured Interview

A follow-up semi structured interview was conducted with two students from each department of the target population to gain in-depth information which might not have been shown in the questionnaire survey. The interview consisted of seven prompt questions similar to those in the questionnaire. The interview discussion was recorded on a mobile phone which was later transcribed. A total of sixty two students

voluntarily participated in the interviews: thirty six students from RGU, sixteen from NERIST and ten from NIT.

Findings and Analysis

A large majority of the students attained the three levels of formal education in English as the medium of instruction (Table 2). However, interviews with the students revealed the practical teaching-learning practice of English education in the state. Most of

the respondents particularly from government institutes said they have had inadequate exposure to the target language in schools and colleges. This

appears to be an important reason why despite learning for so many years students fail to achieve expected level of L2 proficiency.

Table 2: Frequency of medium of instruction at each level of study

Medium of Instruction	Primary School	Secondary School	College
English	78.5%	84.8%	96.1%
Assamese	9.9%	8.0%	2.6%
Hindi	9.4%	7.0%	1.2%
Others	2.2%	0.2%	-

Research question 1: What are post graduate ESL learners' perceptions of the importance of academic writing?

On investigating the learners' perceived importance of general L2 proficiency in their current studies, 202 respondents (48.8%) rated it very important and 126 respondents (30.4%) rated

it most important respectively. Results indicate the students' positive attitude and awareness of the importance of proficiency in English. Proficiency in English is crucial for learners to understand, conceptualize and communicate knowledge and ideas in both academic and non academic contexts at this stage.

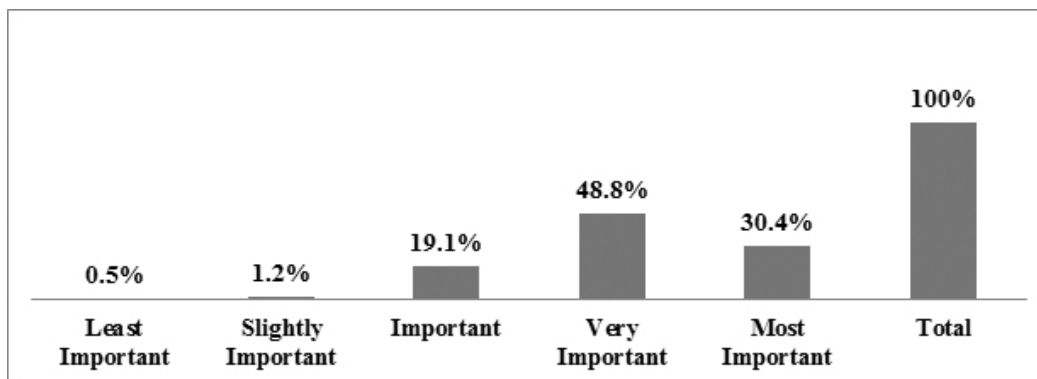


Figure 1: Learners' perception of importance of proficiency in English language.

Of the four language skills (Table 3) listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW), the majority of the students (38.6%) perceived writing skills to be the most important skill. Writing skills is the plank for gauging learners' knowledge of the subject and

English language in the higher education institutions of Arunachal Pradesh. Naturally, writing skills get the prior emphasis from the learners and teachers alike. It can be deduced from the results that students seem to recognize the pertinence of writing at the postgraduate level, even though they considered other skills as also highly essential.

Table 3: Learners' assessment of the language skills

Skills	Least important	Slightly important	Important	Very important	Most important
Listening	1.0%	2.9%	31.4%	26.3%	38.4%
Speaking	0.7%	4.3%	31.9%	28.5%	34.5%
Reading	1.0%	2.7%	32.4%	29.7%	34.3%
Writing	0.7%	2.4%	31.4%	26.8%	38.6%

All the students attached high importance to academic writing skills for their current studies, future career and for research and publication (Table 4). The responses indicate both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations among them for possessing good academic writing skills. Majority of them (41.5%) considered research and publication as the major motivation. It was also revealed through the semi-structured interviews that all of them emphasized good academic writing skills in their current studies as they felt establishing effective communication through their writing is pivotal for getting better grades. Many also said that it helps in understanding and articulating concepts in a lucid manner, and develop critical and objective thinking abilities. In addition, many felt that it can equip them with the appropriate academic style and writing techniques. Many said

that it also prompted them to learn language skills such as rules of grammar and academic vocabulary. All the participants agreed that good academic writing skills have ramifications beyond academics. They help in personal and professional development. Many of them said these skills will equip them to get through competitive examinations and job interviews and also can facilitate growth in corporate sectors. Further, these skills can help in day to day transactions such as drafting official letters, business memos, writing emails and so on. Many participants said that good academic writing skills can help them to pursue research studies in Ph.D. and in other reputed research organizations. They also opined that these skills will help in performing responsible research as these facilitate critical thinking, identifying and problem solving, reading and referencing skills.

Table 4: Learners' perceptions of importance of academic writing skills

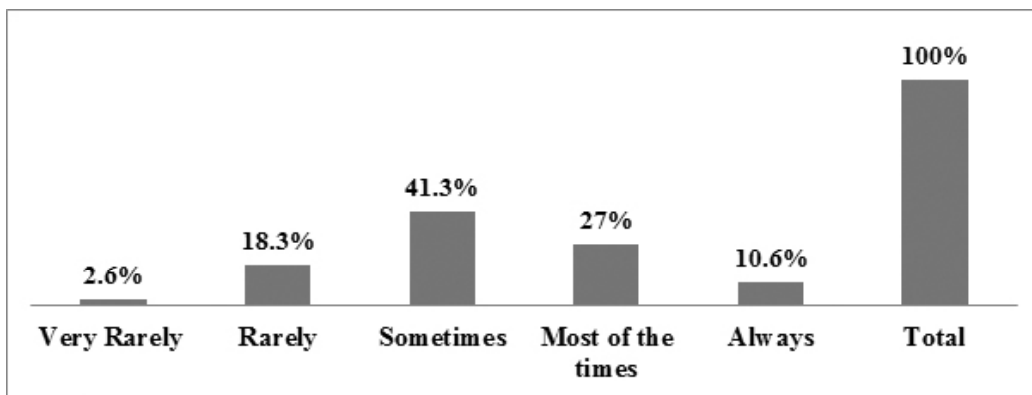
	Least important	Less important	Important	Very important	Most important
(a) How important do you think academic writing skills are to your studies at the Post Graduate level?	1.0%	3.4%	22.2%	47.3%	25.4%
(b) How important do you think academic writing is to your future career in the long run?	0.7%	3.6%	17.9%	40.8%	35.3%
(c) Research and publications.	1.4%	3.6%	20.8%	29.7%	41.5%

Research question 2: what are post graduate ESL learners' perceptions of their proficiency in academic writing?

On investigating the learners' perceived writing competence, it was found that 41.3% of respondents (171 students) could 'sometimes' convey what they wanted to express in their writing. 27% of respondents (112 students) felt they do it 'most of

the times', whereas only 10.6% felt they do it 'always'. Contrarily, 76 (18.3%) and 11 (2.6%) respondents felt they could 'rarely' and 'very rarely' convey what they wanted to express in their writing respectively (Figure 2).

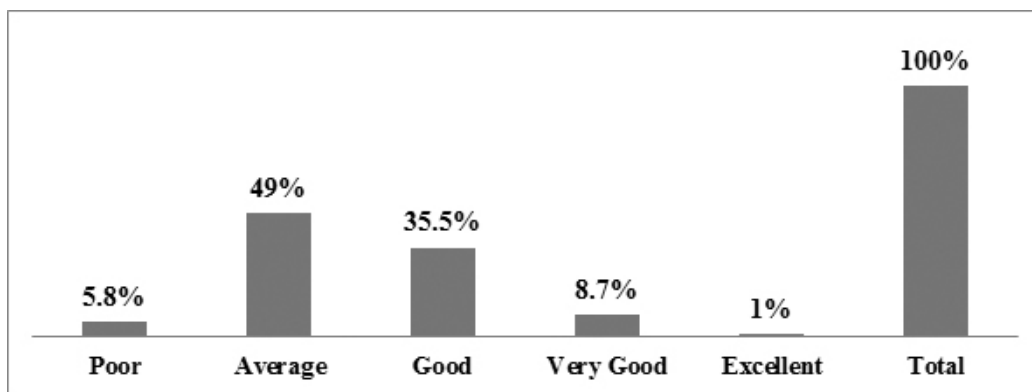
Figure 2: learners' perception of their ability to convey what they want to express in their writing



54.8% of the respondents (227 students) perceived their proficiency in academic writing to be 'poor' to 'average'. 35.5% (147 students) thought they have a good proficiency, whereas, a small number of respondents (40 students) constituting 9.7% thought they have 'very good' to 'excellent' academic writing

skills (Figure 3). Being master's students these learners are expected to be proficient writers in English; however, the results suggest that a large chunk of them lack communicative competence in writing, implying there is a scope for improvement and these learners need to work upon their writing skills.

Figure 3: Learners' perceptions of their proficiency in academic writing



It can be inferred from the results, that there are a considerable number of learners in need of developing their writing ability; a large chunk of learners do not possess adequate level of writing ability, rendering them incapable of conveying what they want to express in their writing.

Research question 3: What are the post graduate ESL learners' perceptions of difficulties of academic writing?

On enquiring the learners' perceived difficulties at different components of writing, 59.7% of the

respondents (247 students) perceived item (a) to be ‘difficult’ to ‘most difficult’. On the other hand, 40.3% (167 students) felt it to be ‘less difficult’ to ‘not at all difficult’ (Table 5). The result suggests that a significant number of learners are not confident about the grammatical correctness in their writing and also lack vocabulary.

For item (b) “context”, 40.5% of respondents (168 students) rated it as ‘difficult’ to ‘most difficult’. 59.4% of the respondents (246 students) rated it ‘less difficult’ to ‘not at all difficult’. The result shows that the majority of learners have a sense of purpose and intended audience of their texts while writing. However, there are still a considerable number

of respondents (40.6%) in need of developing specificity and clarity in their writing through a clearer understanding of their text’s purpose and the audience.

As for item (c) ‘processes’, 55.4% (231 students) rated it as ‘difficult’ to ‘most difficult’ and 44.2% (183 students) rated it as ‘less difficult’ to ‘not at all difficult’. It appears a substantial number of respondents need to integrate these skills in their writing process. Learners should understand that writing as a skill besides several other aspects require generating ideas through the process of planning, organizing, drafting, revising, editing and redrafting.

Table 5: Learners’ perceptions of difficulties at different components of writing

Different Components in Writing	Not at all difficult	Less	Difficult difficult	Very difficult	Most difficult
a. Grammar (Grammatical rules and vocabulary)	5.8%	34.5%	44.4%	9.7%	5.6%
b. Context (The reader one writes to and reason for writing)	8.9%	50.5%	33.3%	6.0%	1.2%
c. Processes (Planning-organizing-composing-revision-redrafting)	7.0%	37.2%	39.2%	11.6%	4.6%

On investigating learners’ assessment of difficulties at the skills involved in writing (adapted from ESLP 82 Questionnaire: self assessment of English writing skills) the results (Table 6, arranged in order of mean frequency) indicate learners face difficulties at almost all items

given. Vocabulary and appropriate word forms posed the most difficulty (M=3.21 of 5), followed by inability to use a variety of sentence structures and logical arrangement of paragraphs (M=3.2), to write in academic style and tone (3.09) respectively.

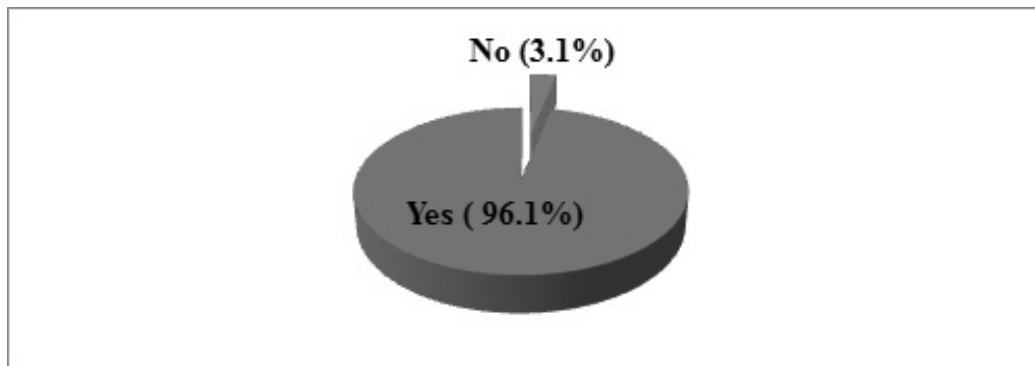
Table 6: Means of learners' perceived writing difficulties (N=414)

Items	Means (Difficulties)
To use appropriate vocabulary and word forms to effectively communicate with the readers	3.21
To use a variety of sentence structures.	3.2
To use logical arrangement of paragraphs to support and develop my thesis statement.	3.2
To write using an academic style and tone.	3.09
To edit my writing, to improve the wording and grammar.	3.06
To write a clear topic sentence that identifies the topic and controlling idea of the paragraph	3.04
To write a good academic paragraph.	3.04
To effectively brainstorm to gather ideas before writing.	3.03
To logically support and develop my main point when I write a paragraph.	3.01
To write using various patterns of organization (e.g. process, comparison, cause, effect).	3
To write an accurate paraphrase of information that I have read in English.	2.97
To use appropriate articles in my writing.	2.95
To outline and logically organize my ideas before writing.	2.95
To write a good conclusion for an English essay.	2.93
To identify problems in my writing and see what should be improved.	2.87
To use appropriate punctuation and capitalization.	2.82
To write an accurate summary of information that I have read in English.	2.82
To revise my own writing to improve the development and organization of ideas.	2.77
To take good notes on readings and then use them to help support my ideas in writing.	2.7
To use my own independent thinking in my writing.	2.59
To use correct spellings in my writing.	2.36
Overall Mean Score	2.93

Further, 96.1% (398 students) (Figure 4) agreed that an academic writing course is necessary for learners at universities and higher technical institutes in Arunachal Pradesh. On the other hand, 3.1% of

respondents (13 students) felt it is not necessary, as they felt a new course would overburden them, the existing post graduate course curriculum was already overwhelming (semi structured interview).

Figure 4: Learners' views on the necessity of academic writing course



Conclusion:

This paper despite several limitations has attempted to assess the post tertiary learners' perceptions of L2 academic writing to understand their attitude, proficiency, difficulties and need to equip themselves with academic writing skills. There are no literature or research studies on how students experience their academic writing at master programmes in the context of Arunachal Pradesh. The results show that the learners have a positive attitude and are aware of academic writing skills for their current studies, research and future careers, but they are not proficient in academic writing. Many students find it difficult to convey what they want to express in their writings. Further, fundamental language skills like grammar and vocabulary posed the most difficulties for them. Students also lacked informed knowledge of the writing processes. It can be inferred that most of these students possess low writing abilities, and there is a marked mismatch between their actual and expected levels of proficiency.

Further, teaching L2 writing skills in English classes is still expected to significantly improve, it is clearly felt that the lack of adequate strategies and means to acquire writing skills among these students must be effectively overcome. Thus, it is crucial to train the students, as most of them are from rural areas and have had less exposure to English to adapt to the demands of the post graduate course curriculum.

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Appendix:

Questionnaire

1. Name:
2. Name of the Institute:
3. Course/ Programme:
4. Medium of Instruction at the given level of studies (please tick your choice):

Level	English Medium	Hindi Medium	Assamese Medium	Any Other (Please specify below)
Primary				
Secondary School				
College (Bachelor's Degree)				

Section-I

Q1. On a scale of 1 to 5 indicate the importance of proficiency in English to your current studies. (Please circle your choice)

1= least important, 2= slightly important, 3= important, 4= very important, 5= most important

Importance of proficiency in English	1	2	3	4	5

Q.2. On a scale of 1 to 5 indicate how important do you think each of the following language skills are? Please circle your choice given in the table.

Skills	Least important	Slightly important	Important	Very important	Most important
Listening	1	2	3	4	5
Speaking	1	2	3	4	5
Reading	1	2	3	4	5
Writing	1	2	3	4	5

Q.3. On a scale of 1 to 5 indicate how important you think academic writing skills are to you in your current studies and future career. Please circle your choice given in the table.

1-least important, 2-slightly important, 3-important, 4- very important, 5- most important

a How important do you think academic writing skills are to your studies at the Post Graduate level?	1	2	3	4	5
b How important do you think academic writing is to your future career in the long run?	1	2	3	4	5
c Research and publications.	1	2	3	4	5

Section-II

Q.4. Do you generally feel that what you write convey what you want to express? Kindly rate your assessment on a scale of 1 to 5. (Please circle your choice)

1=Very rarely, 2= Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Most of the times, 5= Always

1	2	3	4	5
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Q.5. On a scale of 1 to 5 indicate how do you rate your proficiency in academic writing skills? (Please circle your choice)

1= Very Poor, 2= Poor, 3= Average, 4= Good, 5= Excellent

Proficiency in writing in English	1	2	3	4	5
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Section-III

Q.6. Given below is a list of different components in writing. Indicate your level of difficulty at these components of writing on a scale of 1 to 5. (Please circle your choice)

1=Not at all difficult, 2= Less difficult, 3= Difficult, 4= Very difficult, 5= Most difficult

Different Components in Writing	Not at all difficult	Less difficult	Difficult	Very difficult	Most difficult
a. Grammar (Grammatical rules and vocabulary)	1	2	3	4	5
b. Context (The reader one writes to and reason for writing)	1	2	3	4	5
c. Processes (Planning-organizing-composing-revision-redrafting)	1	2	3	4	5

Q.7. On a scale of 1 to 5 indicate how easy or difficult you think the following skills involved in writing are. Circle your choice

	Very Easy	Easy	Neutral	Difficult	Very Difficult
a) To use correct spellings in my writing.	1	2	3	4	5
b) To use appropriate articles in my writing.	1	2	3	4	5
c) To use appropriate punctuation and capitalization.	1	2	3	4	5
d) To use appropriate vocabulary and word forms to effectively communicate with the readers	1	2	3	4	5
e) To edit my writing, to improve the wording and grammar.	1	2	3	4	5
f) To use a variety of sentence structures.	1	2	3	4	5
g) To write a clear topic sentence that identifies the topic and controlling idea of the paragraph.	1	2	3	4	5
h) To write a good academic paragraph.	1	2	3	4	5
i) To logically support and develop my main point when I write a paragraph.	1	2	3	4	5
j) To use logical arrangement of paragraphs to support and develop my thesis statement.	1	2	3	4	5
k) To write using an academic style and tone.	1	2	3	4	5
l) To write using various patterns of organization (e.g. process, comparison, cause, effect).	1	2	3	4	5
m) To take good notes on readings and then use them to help support my ideas in writing.	1	2	3	4	5
o) To outline and logically organize my ideas before writing.	1	2	3	4	5
p) To use my own independent thinking in my writing.	1	2	3	4	5

q) To write an accurate summary of information that I have read in English.	1	2	3	4	5
r) To write an accurate paraphrase of information that I have read in English.	1	2	3	4	5
s) To write a good conclusion.	1	2	3	4	5
t) To revise my own writing to improve the development and organization of ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
u) To identify problems in my writing and see what should be improved.	1	2	3	4	5

Q.8. Do you think an English academic writing course is necessary in University and Higher Technical Institutes of Arunachal Pradesh? (Please tick your choice)

1. Yes

2. No

Thank you

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