Developing the Writing Skill of the M.C.Sc. Candidates at the University of Computer Studies, Meiktila

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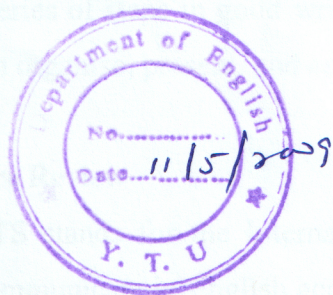
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ABSTRACT

This research report focuses on the ways to develop the writing skill of the M.C.Sc. candidates at the University of Computer Studies, Meiktila. In this research report, the approaches to teaching writing are discussed. These approaches are designed to build students' confidence and proficiency through systematic skill development and graded exam practice. In this report, the strategies for teaching writing are also presented. It is hoped that this research report will be some help in developing the writing skill of the M.C.Sc. candidates at the University of Computer Studies, Meiktila.

Keywords: Writing skill, Academic writing, General training writing, Argumentative writing

Approved.

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1. Introduction

English is the most important language today as it is spoken and understood in all parts of the world. It is also used as the medium of language in all teaching international universities and international trade and commerce. In Myanmar, English is taught as a compulsory subject in schools and universities. Therefore, writing in English is very important for every student.

The purpose of this research report is to highlight the needs for developing the writing skill of the M.C.Sc. candidates at the University of Computer Studies, Meiktila. So, the report aims to promote the students' writing skill through strategies.

Writing is difficult to acquire and has lesser practical application after the course of English. Academic writing is of little practical significance as well because, after graduation, even students majoring in English will hardly ever have any need in writing essays in English for their professional careers or personal goals. As academic writing is the most creative type of writing, it becomes a unique means for learners' consciously mastering the creative, productive and expressive approach towards communicative performance in the target language.

The second type of IELTS writing is the general training writing. It includes writing business and personal letters and summaries. Although the development of relevant writing skill is absolutely indispensable, they are relatively simple to teach due to the highly standardsied nature of the majority of written documents.

Therefore, this research report is prepared with the aim of developing the writing skill of the M.C.Sc. candidates at the University of Computer Studies, Meiktila, by providing with some proper effective teaching strategies for writing. As a result, this paper is hoped that it will provide some help to the students to improve their writing skill. Moreover, this gives the students a series of steps in good writing and opportunities to practise writing effectively so that they can organise, present, and compare their ideas logically.

2. Literature Review

IELTS stands for the International English Language Testing System. It measures ability to communicate in English across all four language skills – listening, reading, writing, and speaking – for people who intend to study or work where English is the language of communication. When the candidates receive their results, they are given a breakdown of the band scores achieved in each of the four sections of the exam and a final band score, which is calculated as an average of the scores for the four separate sections. The writing test is the

third test in IELTS. There is an option of both Academic and General Training Writing Modules.

2.1 The Academic Writing Test

There are two tasks in the academic writing test. In task 1, the candidates are assessed on their ability to organise, present and possibly compare data, describe the stages of a process, describe an object or event and explain how something works. In task 2, they are assessed on their ability compare and contrast evidence and opinions, evaluate and challenge ideas, evidence or argument.

2.1.1 Interpreting Data from the Diagrams

Graphic or pictorial information is given to write a description of information. In this task, candidates are asked to look at a diagram or table and to present the information in their own words. Bar charts, line graphs, pie charts and tables are most frequently given for this task. However, the candidates could also be given an object or series of pictures or diagrams or a flow chart to describe. They are marked on task completion and use of a range of vocabulary and grammar, organisation and development.

2.1.2 Agreeing and Disagreeing with the Argument

The requirement of Task 2 is to write an essay or report on a given topic of general interest. An essay is a literary composition on a particular subject. A report is a formal account made after investigation of a subject, but for the purposes of the IELTS Writing Test, a report can be written in the appropriate style for an essay.

For this task, they are assessed on their ability to present an argument clearly giving evidence or examples to support their ideas. They are also assessed on how well their ideas are organised and the accuracy of the language they use.

Writing Task 2 assessment is based on the following criteria:

(a) *Task Response* means that the essay shows that candidates understood and covered the topic from all its sides, aspect, etc.

(b) *Coherence and Cohesion* means how they well connected the paragraphs and sentences inside each paragraph.

(c) *Lexical Resource* means vocabulary and different types of sentences: simple and complex. The words can be used with their synonyms.

(d) *Grammatical Range and Accuracy* means spelling and grammar of sentences.

2.2 The General Training Test

There are two tasks in general training module. In Task 1, candidates are asked to write a personal informal, semi-formal or formal letter, responding to a given problem or situation. They are assessed on their ability to engage in personal correspondence, elicit and provide general factual information, express needs, wants, likes and dislikes, express opinions, complaints, etc. Task 2 consists of a statement or a point of view, argument or problem about a specific topic. This is followed by instructions asking candidates to discuss the topic by providing general factual information, outlining and presenting a solution, justifying an opinion or evaluating ideas and evidence.

2.2.1 Writing Formal and Semi-formal Letters

Any letter must have three important components: structure, vocabulary, and fluency of language. Structure means that the letter must have paragraphs, at least three of them. Every paragraph has its job.

1. The first one must define the purpose of the letter in one or two sentences.
2. The second one must explain more about why this letter is being written.
3. The third must say what kind of answer is expected.

2.2.2 Writing Argumentative Essays

The IELTS General Training Writing Task 2 is to write a short essay, a discussion of a subject of general interest by presenting and justifying the opinion about something, giving the solution to a problem or comparing different ideas or viewpoints. This task will be marked in three areas such as Arguments, Ideas and Evidence, Communicative Quality, and Vocabulary and Sentence Structure. The argument is to present the case as regards the question. The ideas part is how many and how good the ideas are in helping the argument. The evidence is the fact that the ideas are used to back up. The three parts (Arguments, Ideas, and Evidence) are not independent but blend together to give a good answer. Communicative Quality helps the reader understand the essay and to communicate well with the ideas. Vocabulary and Sentence Structure looks at the grammar and Choice of words.

3. Approaches to Teaching the IELTS Writing Modules

Writing is a complex process that allows writers to explore thoughts and ideas, and make them visible and concrete. Writing encourages thinking and learning for it motivates communication and makes thought available for reflection. When thought is written down,

ideas can be examined, reconsidered, added to, rearranged and changed. Writing is most likely to encourage thinking and learning when students view writing as a process.

3.1 Approaches to Teaching Writing

There are three principal approaches to teaching academic writing underlying teaching methods used.

(a) Textual approach

The traditional textual approach is based on student's reading sample texts and writing essays trying to imitate in them the linguistic, stylistic, and other peculiarities of the texts read and apply them to their own compositions. This approach kills the creativity proper to academic writing, turns it into a process of imitating and/or reproducing what was read in sample texts, and therefore, eliminates those creative advantages of academic writing that are the principal reasons for encouraging students to practise it.

(b) Process approach

The process approach identifies four stages in writing: (i) prewriting, (ii) composing/drafting, (iii) revising, and (iv) editing. These stages are recursive, or nonlinear, and they can interact with each other throughout the writing process. The process approach emphasises revision, and also feedback from others, so students may produce many drafts with much crossing out of sentences and moving around of paragraphs.

(c) Genre approach

The genre approach focuses strongly on how to construct particular kinds of texts. Unlike process writing, the teacher has a strong directional input at the beginning and explicitly scaffolds students' writing structures. The genre approach to writing consists of three phases: (i) the target genre is modelled for the students, (ii) a text is jointly constructed by the teacher and students, and (iii) a text is independently constructed by each student.

In each part the process approach is followed. First, students brainstorm the topic of a paragraph or essay to be written to generate ideas. They have some pictures at their disposal as prompts and stimuli for their discussion. Having generated ideas, learners list, cluster, and group them, finally arriving at the outline of a paragraph or essay. At the brainstorming stage, the candidates always read some paragraphs or whole text on the topic of their writing. The texts are samples of paragraphs or essays (the textual approach).

3.2 Teaching the Academic Writing Module

Writing Task 1 is designed to test the ability of the candidates to interpret and present information that is given in short form, often as data within a diagram, graph, chart or table.

Writing Task 2 is that they write an essay or report of not less than 250 words on a given topic of general interest.

3.2.1 The Academic Writing Task 1

There might be a combination of graphs, tables, and charts and the candidates may be asked to compare the information given. Sometimes, however, even when the question does not specially ask them to compare information, they will probably find it necessary to do so. Alternatively, they may be asked to use the information given to support a written statement.

3.2.1.1 Using reference structures

When referring to a diagram, chart, table, etc., the candidates should be guided using reference structures such as those given below. This will assist the candidates to know where their information comes from, and will effectively lead in to what they have to say (Figure 3.1).

The	table/chart diagram graph	shows (that) ...		According to the As (is) shown in the As can be seen from the	table/chart, diagram, graph, figures,	...
	figures statistics	show (that) ...		It can be seen from the We can see from the	table/chart diagram graph figures	(that) ...
	diagram	shows describes illustrates	how...	It is | clear | from the | apparent |		

Figure 3.1 Using Reference Structures

Source: Adams and Peck (1997)

3.2.1.2 Writing descriptive introduction

All Writing Tasks require an introduction which the teacher should remind to the learners to begin with a topic sentence. The topic sentence of the introduction is a general statement that explains what it is that is being described in the task. The teacher, therefore, should explain to the learners to imagine that the reader does not have the task in front of him

or her. The teacher should suggest that the candidates should begin the introduction with a general statement, and then a 'map' of the body of the essay.

3.2.1.3 Presenting statistics effectively

The candidates should be advised that if they have to organise and present data in their answer, they will need to include the given statistics in an effective manner. Sometimes, they may be asked to compare statistics data. The teacher should guide the candidates that the statistics have to be expressed in percentages:

The statistical data can be presented in a variety of ways:

1. as numbers functioning as adjectives inside or outside brackets
2. as numbers expressed in word form
3. as numbers listed in the order mentioned using the word 'respectively'.

3.2.1.4 Expressing changes in data effectively

The teacher should remind the candidates what they have to notice first if the information is fixed in time or changes over time, if the writing task is a graph. If the information changes over time, the candidates need to express those changes by using words and phrases which describe how it has changed.

The figures given either increase or decrease, fluctuate or remain stable (stay the same). Increases, decreases, and fluctuations can be expressed in either of two grammatical ways (Figure 3.2):

1. verb + adverb form
2. adjective + noun form

Little or no change can be expressed in the following way (Figure 3.3):

The number of (*cars sold*)	remained	steady stable	from (*June*) to (*December*). between (*June*) and (*December*).
	stayed the same		
There was	little hardly any no	change	in the number of (*cars sold*)	from … to … between … and …

Figure 3.2 Expressing Little or No Change

Source: Adams and Peck (1997)

The following figure will assist the candidates:

The number of (*cars*)	increased jumped rose decreased dropped fell fluctuated	suddenly rapidly dramatically sharply steeply steadily gradually slowly	from (*June*) to (*December*) between (*June*) and (*December*)
VERB + ADVERB FORM			

There was a (very)	sudden rapid dramatic significant sharp steep steady gradual slow slight	increase jump rise decrease drop fall fluctuation	in the number of (*cars*)	from ... to ... between ... and
ADJECTIVE + NOUN FORM				

Figure 3.3 Expressing Changes in Data Effectively

Source: Adams and Peck (1997)

3.2.1.5 Expressing trends

Trends are changes or movements. These changes are normally expressed in numeric items, for example, population, production volumes or unemployment. Downward and upward trends can be expressed in two ways:

1. nouns and verbs form
2. adjectives and adverbs form

3.2.2 The Academic Writing Task 2

The style of essay required for Task 2 of the IELTS writing test is standard to academic courses. The essay has a clear introduction which poses the problem. There are three paragraphs which make relevant points on the topic and a conclusion which sums up the main point of the whole essay. The grammar and vocabulary are rich and varied. It is therefore a very good answer. In addition, there is step-by-step practice in producing an effective answer for Task 2, including analysing the question, structuring an argument, beginning and ending, presenting supporting points and writing summarising sentences.

The teacher should remind the students that structure and cohesion have to be evident at the essay level, within and between sentences and paragraphs, and those are very important effect on the readability and clarify of their essays as a whole.

The following factors should be advisable for the candidates while they are taking preparation for an essay:

3.2.2.1 Writing introduction

As an introduction, the teacher should ask a few preliminary questions related to the essay, and then read out the title and explain it briefly. It should be given a brief oral example of what can be said about the topic based on own experience. The teacher should explain the candidates that this introductory task is intended to underline the importance of paragraphing in communicating clearly to the reader. In addition, the teacher should use the question to start a brief discussion and put questions to individual candidates and encourage them to give their own personal answer.

3.2.2.2 Linking phrases

This task introduces the thesis-led approach as an alternative to the argument-led approach. It also looks at linking ideas using expressions of concession or contrast. Therefore, the teacher should take briefly discussion with students on their initial reactions to the exam topic, and give time to highlight key words or phrases in the question and make notes. If more help is needed, the teacher could talk through some of the issues as a class first.

Table 3.1 Linking Phrases

And	But	For example
Also	However	Such as
In addition	Although	For instance
Furthermore	Despite	A case in point
Moreover	In spite of	One example of this
What is more	In contrast	In this way
Not only ------ but also	Nevertheless	
Firstly ---------		
Secondly ------		
Finally ---------		

Source: Adams and Peck (1997)

3.2.2.3 Using trigger words

The candidates at this level need vocabulary practice in two main areas. Therefore, the teacher should give training the way how to use the trigger words which are relevant to

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the each topic. And the teacher needs to make sure the candidates understand that time spent on studying and learning the words will be justified when they come to do their own writing.

3.2.2.4 Identifying the main features

The writing Task 2 questions are of two basic types referred as Type A and Type B questions. Firstly, there are Type A questions which require an argument as an answer. Therefore, the teacher should ask the candidates in training that considering the argument as having two sides (usually yes/no or positive/negative), one of which they support. Secondly, there are Type B questions which require an account as an answer. The teacher has to point out that essays of this type may ask the candidates to describe and explore the situation regarding the topic, with less emphasis on giving opinions.

3.2.2.5 Developing ideas and reasons

Before a candidate can plan the answer, he needs to think of two or more ideas that he will use to support what he has to say in his essay. This step is often referred to as 'brainstorming'. Therefore, the teacher should make the student find ideas by brainstorming. To do this, the teacher should give the students a worksheet and ask them to write down on the paper as many ideas and words they can about the topic they choose. Next, the topic should be put in the middle of an 'Idea Web', and then the teacher has to ask them to put the words they have brainstormed into groups of associated ideas.

3.2.2.6 Writing conclusion

A good conclusion will summarise or draw together the main points of the essay so far. In the conclusion, the students will need to address specifically the question of 'Do you agree or disagree?' If it is possible, the teacher needs to ask the groups to summarise their ideas using only two or three sentences. They should be sure to refer back to the ideas they have already expressed in the previous paragraphs. When they have finished, the candidates should be asked to look at the two sample scripts, they should focus on the ideas, organisation and cohesion. The teacher should give out a copy of the worksheet and encourage them to complete it as they read. After that, discussion should be taken on their answers as a class and they are motivated to apply the same questions to their own essays.

Table 3.2 Introduction and Conclusion Connectors

Introduction	Conclusion	Cause and Effect
This issue/problem Today Generally speaking	Finally To sum up In conclusion In summary Therefore There seems to be little doubt that	As a result Owing to So Because of Since Given that

Source: Adams and Peck (1997)

3.3 Teaching the General Training Writing Module

The writing tasks for the General Training Writing Module differ to those for the Academic Writing Module. The General Training Module Writing Task 1 usually involves writing a formal or semi-formal letter, while the topics for writing Task 2 are more familiar to candidates than those for the Academic Module.

3.3.1 The General Training Writing Task 1

The teacher should suggest the candidates that letters may be classified according to their different purposes. They are

1. Formal letter: business letters including letters of application, official letters and letters to newspapers and

2. Semi-formal letter: social letters including friendly letters and notes of invitations.

3.3.1.1 Writing formal letters

The teacher should point out the candidates that most of the formal letters are written to the local councilor, members of parliament or a prospective employer. Therefore, they have to be explained that the formal letter should be clear, to the point accurate and polite. The teacher additionally needs to suggest them to avoid so far as possible abbreviation.

In organising and structuring the content of a formal letter, the candidates should take care of being polite and succinct.

In a few words, the teacher's coordination and instruction should be made sure that the candidates must pass on its message and create the right atmosphere between itself and the person addressed. The tone of the letter should also be taken care because it will depend upon its purpose as the table above, but no letter should be discourteous.

Table 3.3 Different Kinds of the Letters and their Tone

Purpose of letter	Tone
Request for details (of a course of study, an appointment, an item of equipment) Invitation to a speaker	Clear, simple, direct, and courteous
Application for employment	Clear, direct and factual, confident but not aggressive
Complaint	Clear and direct but not aggressive
Reply (to an enquiry or complaint) giving information, instruction or explanation	Clear, direct, informative, polite, helpful, and sincere
Reply to all the points raised in the enquiry Acknowledgement (of an enquiry or application)	Simple and direct
Acknowledgement by postcard	Discreet
Letter of thanks	Appreciative

Source: Barrass (1996)

3.3.1.2 Writing informal letters

There are many general rules for writing personal letters – to write to someone they know relatively well. The letter should be informal in tone and register. Informal letters usually begin with a friendly opening that shows the relationship between the reader and the writer. When writing to friend and relatives, they are free to write in any way, using a relaxed conversational style.

3.3.2 The General Training Writing Task 2

In this Task 2, the candidates have to write a discursive essay on a given topic which may be in the form of a statement or a question. Sometimes, different or opposing views are expressed; sometimes, there is one view to discuss. There are some points for every candidate whom has to be noted in opinion expression for the General Training Writing.

First, the candidates must answer all parts of the task. It is needed to make its own position clear and provide main ideas and supporting arguments to illustrate this. It should be written a clear introduction and conclusion. Second, the candidates have to develop his writing logically from its introduction through several paragraphs to its conclusion. Within the paragraphs, all ideas should be linked together well. Third, they have to show that it has a range of vocabulary related to the topic and that it can use these words appropriately and accurately. Finally, they have to show that he can write a range of sentence types, use grammar accurately, and to punctuate the writing well. In addition, the following facts are advisable to those who want to develop their skill in writing essays of General Training Writing Test.

3.3.2.1 Providing general factual information

In this task, the teacher should remind the candidates that this task focuses on the importance of selecting key information from the exam briefing on the weighting of each part in the writing paper. It should also be directly relevant to the question and should point clearly to the main body and the conclusion of their answer.

3.3.2.2 Outlining a problem and presenting solution

In this task, the candidates have to outline a problem and present a solution; they must identify the problem, describe it and say how it can be solved. Therefore, the teacher needs to show students a copy of Writing Task 2 to think of a problem; it may be their problem or somebody else's. Then it is needed to ask the candidates to write a paragraph saying what the problem is, and describing it. When they describe the problem, they may also have to say what is causing the problem.

3.3.2.3 Presenting and justifying an opinion

In this task, the candidates have to present and possibly justify an opinion which they can support their opinions with relevant detail. It is permissible to use pronouns because when they express an opinion they say what they personally think about something.

The following words or expressions in the box are advisable as useful language:

I think/believe	⟶	I am sure that
It is my opinion that	⟶	It seems to me that
It seems	⟶	It is evident that
It is obvious/clear that	⟶	Obviously
Clearly	⟶	Evidently

Source: Cameron (2000)

3.3.2.4 Evaluating ideas, evidence or argument

In this task, every candidate should take care that evidence is something which proves an idea or supports a belief or an opinion. An argument is a reason given to support or disprove something. Evaluating something is assessing its worth. If they evaluate an idea, they decide it is a good idea or not. When the candidates challenge an idea or evidence, they question its value or truth. It is very difficult to prove ideas right or wrong, so it is important to have reasons for what they say. As a class, the teacher should ask the candidates to write a paragraph considering the value of the statement in the examples: Is it a reasonable thing to say? Why? Why not?

3.3.2.5 Comparing and contrasting evidence or opinion

Once again, the candidates are free to express their ideas, provided they can be justified. In the class, the teacher should briefly discuss the candidates' initial reactions to the exam topic, and give them time to highlight key words or phrases in the question and make notes. If more help is needed, the teacher could talk through some of the issues as a class first. It may begin by revising the basic structure of an argument-led approach. Therefore, the teacher should make sure the candidates are clear about how two approaches differ, and which situations they are best suited to. Monitoring should be taken onto the candidates' paragraph planning and comparing their results afterwards. The teacher should ensure to read through the examples and discuss the questions as a class. For exercises, the teacher must point out that sentences can be combined or not, depending on which linking expression is chosen. It may be helpful to do the first together to illustrate the various possible answers. In addition, the candidates should be asked to re-read the reminders, the following factors, before they begin the exam-practice task.

1. Analyse the key point of the question.
2. Think of ways of disagreeing and discussing implications.

3. Make a paragraph plan.

4. Use linking expressions to link sentences and paragraphs in logical manner.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this research report is to highlight the need for developing the writing skill of the M.C.Sc. Candidates at the University of Computer Studies, Meikhtila. In order to develop the writing skill of the students, the recommended approaches are presented with the strategies for teaching the academic and the general training writing. Moreover, sample activities for developing the writing skill are suggested to improve the students' writing skill. Therefore, these portions can help the students to improve essay planning and organisation of ideas, writing introduction and conclusion, use of connectors and to develop awareness of text organisation and construction. In conclusion, it is suggested that the students should be encouraged to improve the writing skill and to become proficient in the English language.

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