

Email Writing: Understanding Structure, Tone and Style

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Earn trust with email writing style
Shirley Taylor

Abstract - World has become a global village with the profuse use of electronic communication (email). Email is marvellous, popular and widely used medium with any cost. Thus, good email communication is vital for business. In view of this, failure to communicate appropriately with the intended message seriously disrupts the preface of the business connection. Therein, effective and transparent communication demystifies the success ratio and owns success to preserve the brand image. Email writing features clear, direct, precise and short messages and as it invariably varies from letter writing. Technical graduates must own the email writing skill to forward the personal and profession success in their careers. To add, better understanding of business factors as: what to communicate, how to communicate with precision and soft tone, and to whom to communicate. By all these means, engineering learners deserve effective email writing to market the corporate correspondence. With these, the study focuses the impact of teaching structure, tone and style in email writing for third year engineering graduates. It also spotlights the effectiveness of constructive feedback provisions to better the learners email writing skill.

Key words: Electronic communication, structure, tone, style, constructive feedback, correspondence

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing occupies magnificent role in any corporate correspondence. It is certainly true that most of the communication is done in writing instead of person to person or over phone. Eventually, people will know the senders with their writing, as what is messaged and how it is messaged. Thus, based on the purpose, politeness, and precision eases better understanding; more so, keeping in view of the recipients of the message the appropriate mode of communication is determined. Among numerous means of communication, email or electronic mail holds a central role in the professional workplace. As Hinkle (2002) affirms that email is 'increasingly becoming the preferred means of communication.'

Unquestionably, email is one of the most widely used medium of communications across the globe. It is also the case that the electronic communication is feasible to connect network of people. Wherein, sender must focus to modulate the tone of writing essentially. The tone used in professional mails is normally away from the face to face or personal communication. Simon Haines (2012) asserts that the degree of formality vary considerably based on the text types, as letters can be more informal and conversational in style. But in many cases a neutral style is preferred. Thus, degree of formality is imperative in nature.

Although, email communication will never replace face to face communication yet it lays a central role in social context. But, Shirley Taylor (2007) carried contrasting views; write as if you are speaking to the person in front of you. It is just a wonder of technology that within a second email can be hit to the other side of the globe and could receive in no time as virtually any cost. More so, the retrieval of the mail is relatively easier for the future use, and it also lays a less storage space. Once an email is sent, it is sent forever. The quickness stands as a barrier when the sender composes with the angry or irritated mood. As email is popular vehicle to robust communication, it cannot be taken as granted; Shirley Taylor sheds light on the sloppy perspective of emails 'we are now sending more email messages than ever before. We even email people sitting at the next desk instead of walking a few steps. This familiarity and convenience is encouraging us to nurture sloppy, dangerous habits – habits that could ruin our reputations.'

Crafting human touch in writing frames friendly and long-term professional relationship which discloses not only the better business negotiations but also proves human attitude. Good care deserves to compose with a right tone to set right thing in a right way in a simple, clear, and concise message. Therein, setting a right tone and style is real challenge, as words reflect spoken touch. Every business email disposes intended purposes and earns its own specific objective as – raising enquiries, sending requests, addressing complaints, settling accounts, placing orders, and sending quotations. Nevertheless, irrespective of purpose, right tone is a crucial element to create good impression for the professional growth. Shirley Taylor (2005) confirms that 'Make your writing positive, stimulating and interesting, add some feeling and a personal touch. This will help people get to know the real person behind the message.'

In ESL situation, the learners have limited exposure in writing, especially, vernacular medium background learners. Colloquial writing is one of the problems of writing. Since, they lack enough exposure in letter writing, the mistakes are eventually repeated and many a situations, mistakes are overlooked and never corrected. Thereof, the learners produce ineffective letters. Though, the letter and email writings hold similar tone and style, yet they vary structurally.

To address the problem, one of the ideas while teaching Business English Certificate Vantage popped up, if learners are endorsed with the useful phrases to represent contextual situations, and also if they are explored with the teacher's feedback and remarks to reflective practice on the students sample letters, it may yield effective practice to mitigate the problem. The attempt could naturally ignite some orientation of the self correction and focusing on the minimisation of the mistakes. Therein, the study broadly focuses on teaching email writing as well as using teacher's remarks as a reflective tool.

Digital Correspondence: Structure, Tone and Style of Writing

Communication, itself, conveys the two-way interaction between the parties. Then, tone of communication is wrapped up with 'what to say', 'why do I say', 'how to say it', and 'whom to say' with this, appropriacy of the tone is expressed in a piece of writing a balanced meaningful with the context. Chiefly, 'how to say it' is the central framework of setting up the tone and style in writing. To add, style in writing commonly refers to the choices in lexis and their accuracy of use in the specific written text. Consequently, the tone and style determines the appropriacy of email writing which leads the successful electronic communication. In view of the fact that, writing is the reflection of the writer's tone and style which does affect the intensity of message. As Ober (1995) defines that 'tone in writing refers to the writer's attitude toward the reader and the subject of the message. The overall tone of a written message affects the reader just as one's tone of voice affects the listener in everyday exchanges.' Shirley Taylor (2000) adds that tone as 'paying attention to proper spelling, punctuation and sentence construction.'

Shirley Taylor (2000) writes style as:

- being creative in what you write and how you write
- making your communication look visually attractive by leaving a line space between each paragraph
- using numbered points or bullets appropriately
- using headings of a consistent style
- considering the appropriate tone in your writing
- structuring your messages logically

In common grounds, the perception of the sender to the receiver also ascertains the politeness in email writing. Since the sender is extremely cautious to adjust email accordingly, to set the right tone and style. McCroskey and Teven (1999) say, when individuals perceive a source to sustain feelings of goodwill, they display empathy and caring toward them.

Ober (1995) 'The business writer should strive for an overall tone that is confident, courteous, and sincere; that uses emphasis and subordination appropriately; that contains non-discriminatory language; that stresses the "you" attitude; and that is written at an appropriate level of difficulty.' Ineffective email writing is closely connected to the unsuccessful business correspondence. Therefore, sender needs attentive care to compose style that pleases the recipient to respond to the email message. The present research aims to study the impact of teaching structure, tone and style in email writing. Constructive feedback used as a reflective tool to improve their email writing performance.

Shirley Taylor (2000) writes tone as:

Your message reflects the spirit in which you put your message across. Even when writing a complaint or replying to one, your message can be conveyed in a way so as not to be rude or cause offence. Ignoring the need to use an appropriate tone could result in a message that sounds aggressive, tactless, curt, rude, sarcastic or offensive

Feedback for Better Learning

Feedback is an important part of the assessment process. It is the most powerful tool in teaching and learning process so it encourages unlearning and relearning to adapt revised learning strategies. The best part is, it reflects on self learning practice. Has a remarkable effect on student learning process and has been described as 'the most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement' (Hattie, 1999).

Nicol (2019) writes critically that feedback directs to develop the learners' ability to monitor, evaluate and regulate the self learning process. It is a fruitful journey as it actively engages to think critically so as what needs to be done to improve the learning. Further, it spotlights to perceive learning in a new way which optimises long-term gain with better learning satisfaction. Furthermore, the timely feedback intervention reinforces active learning which is immensurable. The study reinforces to use timely, specific, with appropriate tone of constructive feedback on the student's email writing samples. Reason is to ignite the learner awareness, where exactly they were wrong, and for its revision. Numerous studies prove that instant feedback is definitely valuable when rendered promptly with motivating words.

With the researcher's common observation is that learners, sometimes, write mails but they do not fit the email writing structure, more so, degree of formality is never met, and also the avid use of conversational style impedes the communication. Although there are numerous deviations, these are a few reasons to establish significant reasons for the study.

The study aims to study the impact of teaching structure, tone and style in email writing at third year engineering graduates. It also spotlights the effectiveness of constructive feedback which provisions to better the learners email writing skill.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Shirley Taylor (2007) *Model Business Letters, Emails and Other Business Documents*

Taylor's work on the needed writing skills, essentially, correspondence is vital phase. Primarily, the work sets the tone of conveying written communication with the human touch; additionally, the work speaks about her immense passion and energy to embark informative and practical guide for the advance learners. It focuses on corporate communication as email writing, writing online, blogs and social networking. Further, the literature also glimpses on the internal correspondence as meetings reports and proposals, circular and notices so on. The study has enveloped relatively 500 specimen email letters dealing with a comprehensive range of transactions, with the swift and lucid writing for everyday business. To sum, the work is helpful to the professionals of the technological era. Samples of email writing have been taken as models for the current study.

Paul Emerson's *Email English*

Emerson's work is typically for the business English and general English. It is a supportive material for writing emails, social media communication. Exercising from the real life examples, *Email English* supports systematic convincing emails in English with an appropriate tone through social media. It is a self-study and supplementary material for the business learners and also widely includes opening, main body and closing emails, giving information, arranging meetings, making requests and so on. The work succinctly presents both formal and informal emails and phrase bank for business communication to construct more effective emails both personal and professionals at work.

Joan Waldvogel. (2005). *The role, status and style of workplace email: A study of two New Zealand workplaces. PhD thesis. Victoria University of Wellington*

The study discusses ethnographic research carried out in two very different workplaces – manufacturing plant and educational platform – to explore the relation of culture, role status and style of emails. It combined corpora of 515 email messages as primary linguistic data. The emails are different from the two organisations. Emails from the manufacturing plant exercises more features of solidarity. More so there was a difference of male and female style of communication. Women used longer messages and that of their male counterparts. A few instances the emails carry authoritative tone and directive language.

Anna Danielewicz-Betz. (2013). *(Mis)use of email in student-faculty interaction: Implications for university instruction in Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Japan.*

The study envisages student-faculty communication by email and the lack of implicit guidelines which results to misuse of email. The objective is to bridge the research gap on other than requestive speech acts in e-interaction, looking into pragmatic markers by student politeness. The study observes from the corpus is that students require instruction in email writing essentially in academic domain. The emails from Saudi students remarked both in polite and impolite expressions. To add, there is a lack of pragmatic competence in all the three groups of students. The results also show that students are unaware the prominence of email messages in creating their professors impressions about them. They frequently never look into adjusting the email style to the academic arena, as they are addressing their professors the same way as they write to their friends. By and large, it turns relatively apparent that students need formal instruction in email writing as well as specific guidelines to frame the messages with polite texture.

The reason research is needed that learners are novice to write emails. It is known fact that they are avid users of whatsapp texting but it broadly varies from that of email communication. More so, they are inexperienced to exhibit formal email writing. The background of the study assists to ascertain what the elements research carried out are and to know the area of importance to the present study.

III. METHODOLOGY

Objectives

The framework of the study is to analyse the impact of teaching structure, tone, and style and the use of constructive feedback as a reflective tool to develop email writing. Pre-test and Post-test samples were rendered to ascertain the improvement of email writing.

Research Questions

The study attempts to offer answers to the following research questions:

- Does teaching intervention eases to improve the structure, tone and style of email writing?
- Does the constructive feedback facilitate to better email writing skill?

Hypotheses

It is hypothesised that the use of teacher's remarks on sample email writing intuitively understood the need to use appropriate structure, tone, and style in email writing.

Samples

The sample included 25 third-year engineering students' both male and female were formed for the study.

Procedure

Firstly, pre-test samples had been collected before the teaching intervention on email writing.

Firstly, to pursue the study pre and post test email writing has been conducted. Samples have been collected from pre and post test of email writing.

Data Analysis

Pre and post test of email writing samples have been analysed.

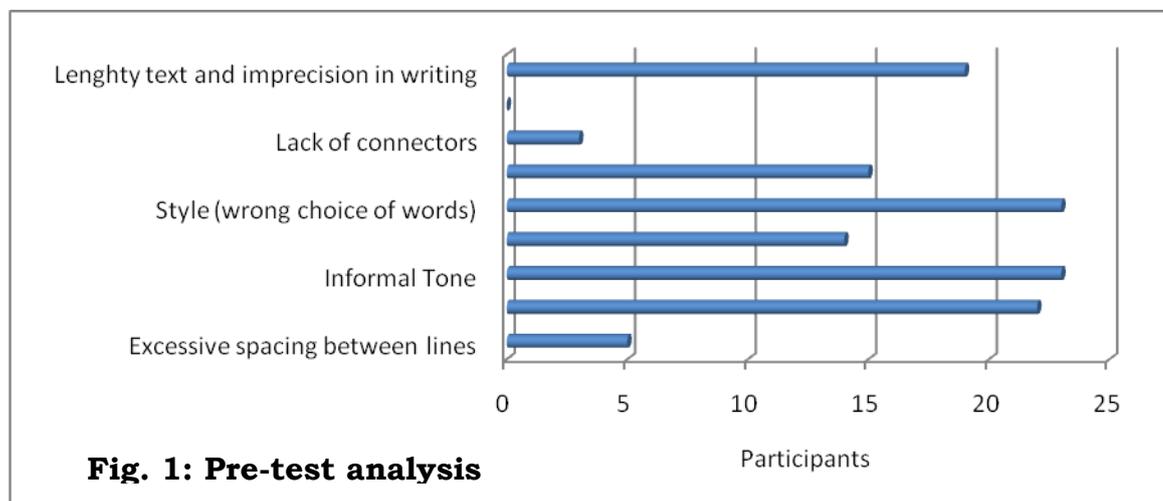
Pre-Test Samples

Major difficulties encountered when writing emails by the learners in Pre-test samples.

The results of the pre-test on email writing revealed that majority of the learners display improper structure, informal salutation, used emojis, sms text, double line space, colloquial writing, and impoliteness as it is due to lack of email writing conventions. Specifically, 80% of the learners used colloquial expressions as *I want to have some time with my family members*. Quite a number of participants employed conversational tone. To add, learners did not know how to write subject precisely and meaningfully. Lack of precision in email writing was found in larger portion of the participants.

Most of the learners have greater difficulty to present a formal tone in writing. More than seventy percent of the learners wrote lengthy mails and lacked coherence in writing. Seventy percent learners used capital alphabet which is unwelcome (see appendices sample writing 5). Organisation and range of language is poor as they are impeding the communication. WhatsApp texting, many times, become impediment to write complete spelling, so while writing formal emails learners used sms text (see appendices sample writing 1). Overall, majority learners lack writing natural language and natural business tone. (see Appendices Student sample 1 in).

Pre-test identified email writing discrepancies among engineering students. It is found that lack of exposure in email writing driving them with these mistakes.



Teaching Intervention

Teachers are the teaching practitioners are viewed as the investigators and implementers to execute the research methods, approaches as well as the best teaching practices. When the teaching is motivated by the research outlook, findings become noteworthy. Further, teacher's goal is to meet the educational objectives, whereas, researcher's is to address the research questions. Techniques, methods and approaches tend to differ to pursue the both. Thus, the current study appends teaching intervention to accomplish the research questions. The framework of the study is pre-test, teaching intervention, post-test as well as feedback was used to enhance tone and style in email writing skills among tertiary level learners.

To escalate the email writing efficiency, ten-hours sessions was conducted online. Importance of writing in corporate correspondence, email writing etiquettes, structure, style and tone was taught. Digital classes are a real challenge to the teacher to meet the outcomes of the course. The structure, sample email letters, useful phrases on seeking permissions or advice, raising complaints, and writing enquiry emails (see appendix) were taught.

More so, the learners were taught the difference between informal and formal emails. Thus, teaching intervention included:

- How to start an email?
- What to include in an email?
- How to close it?
- Prominence of subject line
- Dos and Don'ts of email writing
- Effectiveness of tone (formal) and style (choice of words)
- Useful phrases depending upon the purpose of the email
- Use of punctuations
- Brief and precision are the key in email writing

The hardest task for the learners is to write formally, if they lack enough writing environment, it affects their writing. Exposure in writing forms advantages as it assists to build up formal phrases easily.

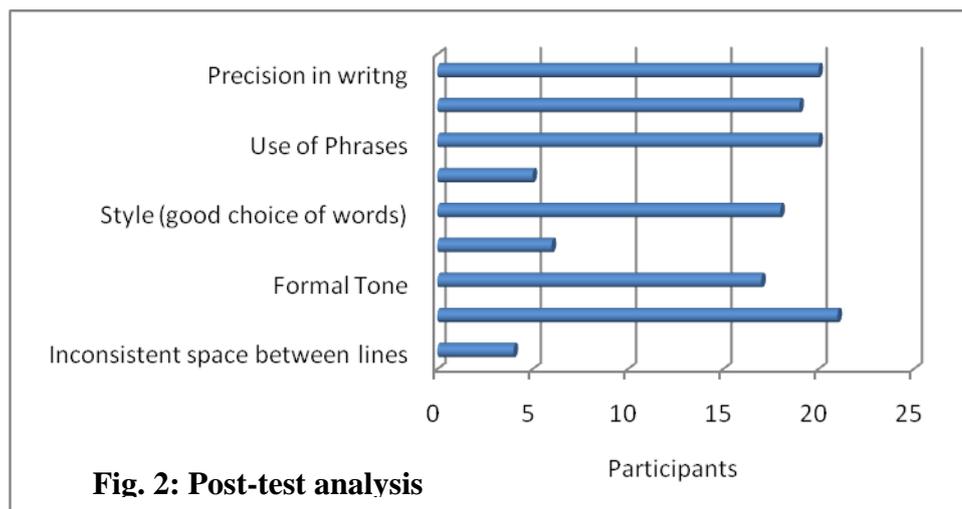
To motivate the learners to attend the session, the researcher invested an effort to talk to them personally, as it is to drive the attention and motivate towards the class. Consequently, a few of them turned up classes wilfully. The email writing samples were taken from Sherlay Taylor. (2007). *Model business letters, emails, and other business documents* to teach tone and style of email writing.

Post-Test Samples

Post-test email writing samples data for the study were collected to ascertain whether they meet the hypotheses.

The findings of the post-test samples disclose that majority (21) of the learners are able to write email structurally. Most of the learners used subject line precisely and also correct salutation. The satisfactory number (20) learners could able to develop formal writing by using frequently used phrases and coherence in writing.

According to the samples, participants could understand difference in conversational style and formal style. With the use of phrases, learners were able to develop precision in email writing.



Regarding the use of SMS text, learners (8) were able to mitigate in emails as they understand the degree of formality hampers completely in formal writing. Majority of participants become aware how the coherence in writing makes the flow of reading understandable. This is so that they understood from the recipient's viewpoint. Wherever necessary, to reflect degree of formality, model verbs have been employed. Additionally, there was coherence in the overall organisation of the email. For the clear flow of the sentences, cohesive devices also been used as *so, therefore, hence, but, unfortunately* so on. Referring to the tone and style, subjects (17 & 18) able to write formal tone and use appropriate words respectively, since words reflect the intention of writing. Though good number of participants could understand to write email writing, yet less proficient learners (6) could struggle to develop coherence in writing. To address the problem, researcher invested an extra sessions for them. More so, they were asked to collaborate with their peers. Peer review assisted less proficient learners to write better emails than before. So, a gradual change was observed with the peer collaboration.

Thus, teaching intervention established an effective tool to enhance tone and style of email writing among tertiary level learners.

Constructive Feedback as a Reflective Practice

The learners writing samples are the outcome of their learning, and they also enables to know the proficiency level. Constructive feedback as rendered who did not have closing remarks, included subject line in the inbox. A few email writing reflect their low level of motivation in writing. Required feedback on the weak email writing has been rendered to revise them. Respondents (2) used capital case in the middle of the letter as:

I am writing this email to inform you that I will not be able to come into work FOR TWO WEEKS, as I met with an accident on my way home from the office today.

To mitigate the problem feed and comments has been used to encourage them to learn from their mistakes. Feedback also establishes an effective technique to rethink on the learners mistakes in email writing. By doing so, learners have become self-aware and initiated developing better understanding and they started participating actively.

Findings of the study

The samples of the pre-test and the post-test reflect the contribution to the study.

Majority of the learners (21) could write structural email with formal tone and better use of words.

- Subjects (20) engaged writing with the effective use of phrases.
- Use of SMS was slashed by (13) to (6) participants.
- The use of emojis was dropped from (14) to (4) participants.
- Participants (18) fail to write precisely and unnecessary content in the body of the email was found. Post-test samples show that the precision in writing (19) participants.

OBSERVATIONS

Researcher has worked closely to build up the students email writing skills. In ESL situation, language learning becomes enthusiastic with the earlier language exposure, but the problem with the less proficient learners. Owing to their weak writing, they are less motivated to respond to the teacher's instruction. Research invested personal interest with the weak learners, so to ignite the motivation; peer collaboration was beneficial to make some difference in weak learners writing. Personal monitoring and seeking feedback on the online classes has assisted to motivate and drive towards online platform.

Frequently used phrases in email writing have set the writing in formal tone and style. This led the learners chiefly to improve the thought process. Peer assistance has driven their learning better than earlier one.

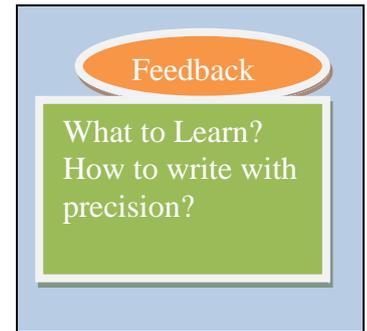
IV. CONCLUSIONS

The study attempted for the exploration of the learners' perceptions about the use of video recordings for the development of students' speaking skills and expressing abilities especially, while participating in group discussion, debate and presentations in the ESL classroom. The results obtained by the analysis of students' questionnaire, it contributed for the improvement of the learners' overall speaking skills. It can be concluded that the use of video recording in classroom teaching context, improved students' speaking skills and it can also be an effective and useful technique in developing oral proficiency. However, students' attitudes towards the use of video recording for improving speaking skills proved that it was an effective for active participation and improvisation. This stance is supported by the questionnaire that was used in the study, majority of the students expressed that video recording aided them to practice speaking that offer them for self-correction and practice more.

The study is suggested that this research can be used as a reference to explore to develop other language skills for the future research.

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(Fig. 3.Feedback)

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Pre and Post Test samples of Email writing

Pre-test sample 1

Good morning sir :)

Rakesh here.

Reason for dropping mail is i need 2 week's gap in my working duration

I want to have some time with my family members.

So please grant me a leav.

I ensure that after returning I'll complete all my pending works.

And dont worry sir for any urgency i'll be available for Emergency calls :)

Hope you grant me a leave

Drop a response i'll be waiting for that

Thank you :)

Pre-test sample 2

Sir,

As I discussed yesterday, I would like to request a formal leave of absence from my job, I plan to be away from Aug 25,2020 - Sept 1,2020, returning to work on Sept 2,2020.

If approved, I would be glad to help with a plan to cover my workload in my absence.I will also be available to answer questions and provide assistance while I am away.

Please let me know if you need any additional information. Thank you very much for considering my request.

Respectfully

321810304059

Pre-test sample 3

**Subject: Leave Application for TWO WEEKS
RESPECTED SIR,**

Please treat this email as an application for leave. I would like to inform you that I require a **TWO WEEKS OF ABSENCE**. I need to visit the bank in my hometown for some personal work, and I need to travel there as soon as possible. Clubbing my leave with the weekend enables me to get this done easily and be back by the following Monday morning.

I am including the work plan for the day I will be taking an off to make it easier for you. Please feel free to contact me at my personal number in case of any questions or clarifications.

Sincerely,

Post Test Sample

Post Test Sample 4

Sir,

As we discussed yesterday, I would like to request a formal leave of absence from my job. I plan to be away from Sep 5, 2020 - Sep 12, 2020, returning to work on Sep 13, 2020.

If approved, I would be glad to help with a plan to cover my workload in my absence. I would also be available to answer questions and provide assistance while I am away.

Please let me know if you need any additional information. Thank you very much for your consideration of my request.

Respectfully,

Post-test Sample 5

Dear Boss,

I am writing to you about the possibility of taking leave for the next two weeks.

As you are aware I am doing my Ph.D. at New York University. And my final term exams are in the next week. A two-week leave would give me enough time to prepare for these exams.

I can assure you that I'd be available for emergency calls. And I'd be working overtime after the completion of my exams.

I understand that my long leave would result in difficulty in the test of the team, But I really need this to complete my Ph.D. degree.

I am looking forward to your response and expecting your kind cooperation.

Yours sincerely,

Bio-Data

Dr V Durga Prasad earned PhD in English Language Teaching from Maulana Azad National Urdu University (a central university established by the act of parliament), Gachibowli, India. He is largely interested in –Academic Writing, Error Analysis, Assessment, Dictionary studies, Technology intervention in ELT, and Phonetics. To add up, his central focus is to develop written communication among territory grade students.

Besides, he owns thirteen years of experience in teaching for engineering students. Currently, he serves in the capacity of Assistant Professor of English at GITAM University, Bengaluru Campus, Karnataka, India.



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