

English Language Competence of Mass Communication Graduates

Abstract

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Background: *Journalists in Pakistan require to have adequate know-how and a good command over the English language in order to become able to perform their duties more appropriately to the satisfaction of their employers as well as their readers.*

Research Aim: *This study investigates the English language skills of mass communication graduates in Pakistan. The study fills a gap as there has been no previous research in this area.*

Methodology: *This descriptive-exploratory research uses a semi-structured interview technique to get information from teachers and former students of the mass communication department of a public sector university in Karachi and to know the opinions of media professionals about the graduates of this institute.*

Findings: *The outcomes drawn from the research indicated that there is a significant disconnect between what the news industry needs and what mass communication teachers are producing. The study*

concludes that there is a need for specific English language courses for mass communication students to prepare them adequately for the profession.

Keywords: *English language skills, journalism teaching, mass communication, news industry*

Introduction

Good English language skills can result in better job opportunities in many professions. From job interviews to actual professional work, these skills are crucial in many fields. Lack of English language skills often results in poor employability (Sankar & Rajan, 2016).

People working for mass media in Pakistan have to use English to a great extent in their everyday work. Therefore, they need to have command over this language. The most important task they perform in English is reading policy documents, court judgments, international news reports, and other source materials. Translation skills are also frequently needed. Besides, journalists in Pakistan sometimes have to interview people whose first language is English. So, they need well-developed listening and speaking skills as well. Those

working for English newspapers should also be able to write in English faultlessly and quickly.

Mass media are the means to disseminate information to a mass of people. Mass media has three general categories: print, electronic and digital. Print media includes daily newspapers, weeklies, fortnightlies, monthlies, quarterlies, etc. These newspapers are generally published in many languages across Pakistan, including Urdu, English, Sindhi, and Gujrati. On the other hand, electronic media includes television and radio. Whereas digital media involves news websites as well as social networks on the internet.

In Pakistan, the dominant medium of mass communication had been newspapers until the allowance and inception of television channels in the early 2000s by the government. News websites emerged around the same time. Despite the emergence of TV news channels and news websites, English newspapers are considered the most credible member of news media in Pakistan. A large number of people rely on the English press for in-depth analyses of social, political, and economic issues (Kiran, 2019).

Journalists must be proficient in English since many news stories used by local media come from around the globe and are predominantly in English. Besides, speeches and interviews of other countries' leaders have to be transcribed and translated. Journalists have to get facts and figures from such institutions as World Bank, IMF, WHO, and UNESCO.

Furthermore, most corporate sector top officials usually speak in English and prefer English while being interviewed. Then there are reporters covering court proceedings. They cannot do their job if they cannot understand formal English in which laws, interim orders, or final judgments are written. Likewise, sports journalists have to be good at English as they have to report international match proceedings. All the institutes that teach mass communication teach their students how to write news stories in English. The students are also taught how to conduct interviews.

However, to date, no research has been found studying the English language needs of journalism students in Pakistan. Therefore, this study aims to understand the role of English language skills of university students in determining their prospects for employment in Pakistan's print

news industry. One principal aim of the study was to understand how English language skills are taught to university students.

The findings of this study can be helpful for policymakers at the mass communication departments of universities in designing and executing courses that prepare their students better for their professional life, which will, in turn, help the newspaper industry as it will get adequately skilled workers.

For this study, teachers at the mass communication department of a public sector university in Karachi, Pakistan, and local media professionals, including recruiters, were interviewed. The professionals include graduates of the same department.

Literature Review

There is a general agreement among journalism researchers that students' news writing abilities can be evaluated by looking at how they pick and arrange information and how they present it. Many professionals say that journalism theories are given a lot of importance by teachers at the expense of students' skills in writing grammatically correct news items with varied vocabulary. As a result, mass communication graduates have difficulties constructing proper news

stories during their first job exposure. The most common problems are those grammar and the use of appropriate words.

Professionals say students need to be equipped with different styles of writing news stories, editorials, and features. They also need to develop the ability to write clearly, with relevant details and facts. Furthermore, they should have the ability to write with correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalisation. In addition, they should know appropriate and interesting words. Also, they should have the skill to formulate attention-grabbing headlines.

Journalists need to have well-developed writing skills to write news stories and transcribe interviews. They also need reading skills to gather news (Yuanti, 2014). Those graduating with a journalism degree must have faultless writing abilities (Kuban, 2014).

Media writing courses are meant to prepare the next generation of journalists (Bissell & Collins, 2001). The researchers say the quality of journalism is set by the level of writing instruction students get at journalism schools.

While teachers consider writing, reporting, editing, and proofing the most

critical skills for their students, editors consider writing, proofing, and editing the skills they want all aspiring journalists to have (Lepre & Bleske, 2005). Thus, there is an agreement between teachers and professionals that writing and editing are the most essential skills.

Wiratno (2018) stressed that students should be able to report what they observe in an unambiguous manner. They should be able to use correct tense forms and grammar while writing.

Journalism teachers find news writing the most challenging class to teach because students lack English grammar skills (Dickson & Olson, 1992). The researchers also found it surprising that journalism teachers did not frequently discuss what should be done to improve their students' writing skills. Students' writing is usually unclear and convoluted because they have not been trained in writing clearly or have not received enough attention at previous levels of their education. The researchers said the most typical reason was that most of them had never been taught how to write clearly. Much of the writing that English teachers encourage, whether consciously or unconsciously, is not simple. The researchers concluded that English composition classes

fail to teach students the skills needed in professional life. Good journalistic writing is clear and straightforward, but college teachers discourage such writing (Dickson & Olson, 1992).

The professionals want the teachers to make their students read more and more because those who wish to inform others of current events must have in-depth knowledge of such events themselves. They say this will also develop their writing skills (Kuban, 2014).

Dawning (2010) analysed the English communication needs of journalism students in Hong Kong. He said more than 80 percent of the respondents did not have the relevant vocabulary for writing news. Besides, he said, about 40 percent of the respondents were unsure when to use perfect tenses. Moreover, about one-third of them found it difficult to use reported speech and were confused when they had to express numbers and figures in English.

Journalistic writing demands carefulness and accuracy more than any other genre does (Hyde, 1928). This researcher said journalistic writing should not be called "news writing". Instead, it should be called

advanced English composition, he recommended.

Massé and Popovich (1998) said journalism teachers knew what the problems were, but they still failed to address them. The teachers find many grammatical and style errors, but they remain unable to decide what should be done to fix these problems.

Wiratno (2018) also said writing news items in English is not an easy task for students of English as a second language because it involves not only selecting relevant information but also providing it to the readers in a clear manner, without grammatical and semantic mistakes.

Paglinawan (2018) studied the competence of journalism students at the College of Arts and Sciences, Notre Dame of Dadiangas University, Philippines, in various types of writing needed by newspapers. He concluded that teachers should provide better grammatical instruction to enable students to write well.

Clark (2014) exclaimed that journalism competence could not be achieved if one does not know how to use language effectively. The researcher claimed that journalists are like authors as their work ranges from writing about civic issues to

commenting on literary works. He also added that those who are competent could write in different genres, keeping in view which will read their writing. He said there were other media and communication methods, but the written word on the page got the most profound consideration. He further asserted that journalists learn the language as they learn other things, but they can get better and better at writing if they keep practising. He recommended that journalism students read George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" to improve their journalistic writing.

Dickson and Olson (1992) also found that English teachers usually liked unclear texts. They were prone to finding more errors in clearly written essays than in complicated ones, although the essays were the same. Only the styles were different. They also said there are two breeds of writing teachers: those who teach journalism and those who teach English. The edge that journalism has over English is that journalistic writing is clear, precise, and at the same time, enjoyable. They said some English teachers encourage clear writing, but most do not do so. As a result, students developed poor writing skills, particularly hurting journalism students. The researchers further emphasised that the most critical factor is that English

composition is taught without a real-world context, and students think no one will read their writing. English composition lacks accurate, meaningful content, and students usually write without having proper knowledge of the topic. They write only for the sake of clearing the exam and not to learn the art of writing.

Some students dislike English classes as they do not see any practical application of the writing instruction they receive (Dickson & Olson, 1992). These researchers recommended that journalism institutes try to get English teachers to rethink their composition instruction ways.

Paglinawan (2018) argued that writing in English for newspapers is a very challenging task for second language learners because they have first to learn the structure and the vocabulary and then many other things. Journalists are to write in standard language, ensuring that there are no grammatical mistakes and that their writing is cohesive and coherent. Writing can be a painful exercise if a journalist does not have these abilities. Journalistic writing is considered below literary writing, but still, it is not fun. Journalists are often lost for words if they have not had sound language training (Paglinawan, 2018).

Very often, incorrect use of linking words makes the copy look bad. This often creates misunderstanding. Besides, overuse of coordination makes news complicated to read, and readers are unable to focus on the facts that have been reported. Connectors are a major problem for the second language (L2) writing. Paglinawan (2018) said teachers must pay attention to these writing problems faced by students.

For graduates of mass communication, language deficiency can be very damaging because the profession depends on their communications skills. Journalism students have to learn the art of providing maximum information in the fewest possible words. Paglinawan (2018) found that many writing courses fail to achieve their objectives. At the end of the course, participants find themselves as they were at the beginning. Kuban (2014) also reported that professionals wanted teachers to direct their energies toward building their students' writing skills.

An English language teacher was not only likely to be an excellent teacher but also have the correct educational point of view (Hyde, 1928). This researcher claimed that it was easier for a composition teacher to acquire journalistic knowledge than for a

reporter or editor to get rid of the professional point of view while teaching. But the English teacher, he said, must acquire the journalistic point of view by working for a newspaper for some time.

With the foregoing as the backdrop, this study investigated the English language competence of mass communication students at a public sector university in Karachi, Pakistan. The three recruiters were asked the following questions:

1. What is the weightage of English proficiency in hiring a fresh graduate?
2. Which skills do you seek the most: reading, writing, speaking, listening, translation?
3. What percentage of candidates do you find adequately skilled in English?
4. Do you think there is a gap between what news organisations need and what is produced by mass communication institutes in terms of English language skills?

The two professionals who are graduates of the mass communication department were asked the following question:

1. Do you think you were trained by your teachers in English language

skills that are required to excel in your profession?

The two teachers were asked the following questions:

1. What is the percentage of students who take journalism courses in English?
2. How good are they at English when they get enrolled?
3. Are there any courses designed to improve the English language skills of your students?

All interviews included several follow-up questions.

Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is used to gain an understanding of the reasons, opinions, and motivations behind the actions of individuals or groups. Qualitative methods are most useful for finding how the respondent perceives the world (McCracken, 1988).

There are no hard and fast rules for sample size in qualitative research. It depends on what the researcher wants to know, what the objective of the study is, how much

information is needed, what data will be considered credible, and the time and resources available (Patton, 1987).

Qualitative research employs such tools as direct observation, interviews, open-ended surveys, focus groups, and analysis of visual or textual data. These methods can be easily adapted keeping in view the nature of the study and are usually cost-effective.

This is a descriptive-exploratory study. In accordance with Dulock (1993), descriptive research describes the characteristics of a population in an accurate and systematic manner. Descriptive-exploratory research designs help researchers find what is happening, how, where, when, and who the principal actors are in a given situation. Descriptive-exploratory research studies allow researchers to get information about the current state of affairs and to describe the situation while keeping in view different factors.

Carpenter (1954) says the descriptive design is aimed at a clear description of the phenomenon under investigation. Such studies pave the way for further research in which quantitative data can be gathered. These studies allow the development of

hypotheses and identification of areas that need to be explored.

The data collection technique chosen for this research was semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is a meeting in which the researchers do not have to strictly follow a list of questions. They ask open-ended questions, which allow a detailed discussion with the interviewees.

William (2015) says semi-structured interviews are ideally suited for qualitative research, particularly when more than a few open-ended questions require follow-up queries. As per Newton (2010), semi-structured interviews provide rich information which improves the quality of research.

Semi-structured interviews are usually conducted with one participant at a time. These interviews can be done face-to-face or on the phone. Sometimes, research questions are sent to the participants through email, and further questioning is done on the phone. Some questions are prepared before the interview, and many can come up during the interview process. Such interviews usually last about half an hour.

The semi-structured interview technique was chosen for this research

because it allowed the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the problems faced by journalism graduates when they enter the market. Those interviewed for this research were selected using a criterion sample. A criterion sample includes people that meet some well-specified criterion (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

For this study, two mass communication teachers and five working journalists were interviewed. Of the five journalists, three are also responsible for hiring staff. The remaining two are professionals who studied at the mass communication of the university.

The primary criterion was the designation of the participants, and the secondary criterion was the time they had spent in their respective fields. Recruiter 1 is the City Editor, whereas recruiter 3 is the Op-Ed Editor at the English language daily. While recruiter 2 was the Editor at an Urdu language newspaper. All three have been hiring journalists for at least 10 years. The recruiters were interviewed because they could provide the best opinion about the skills that entry-level journalists must possess.

Teacher-1 and Teacher-2 have been teaching journalism students writing and editing courses in English at the mass communication department for at least 10 years.

Professional-1 and Professional-2 studied in the same department in a four-year programme and have been working for English language newspapers for more than five years. These professionals were interviewed because they could connect their experience with the journalism curriculum at the university with the skills required in the print news industry.

The teachers were interviewed on the phone. The recruiters and practitioners were interviewed in face-to-face meetings.

Data analysis is central to credible qualitative research. The data obtained through the interviews were thematically analysed. Mortensen (2020) underlined that a thematic analysis aims to identify specific patterns in the data collected through interviews. One of the main advantages of thematic analysis is that it is a flexible method that can be used for descriptive as well as explorative studies.

Nowell et al. (2017) indicated that thematic analysis is an apt method for

qualitative studies because it can be used when the researchers have to analyse a large amount of data.

All interviewees were ensured regarding the confidentiality of their identities and that no identifying information would be disclosed, and that data obtained through interviews would not be used for any other purpose. Because of the limited time available to the researcher, current students of the department could not be interviewed. Later studies may fill this gap.

Results

The ratio of English and Urdu students at the department is 50:50. Students are put in respective sections based on a diagnostic assessment before the semester begins. In the Functional English course for Urdu students, which is offered in BS First Year and MA Previous, there are composition exercises.

An English grammar course used to be taught apart from the Functional English course, but that was done away with in the mid-1990s. What the profession demands: All five professionals agreed that language skills, particularly writing, were the most important for journalists, whether working for Urdu newspapers or English. They

pointed to the fact that journalists often have to play the role of a translator.

Recruiter-1 said they considered language skills the most important and gave much less weightage to general knowledge. In the test given to candidates, 60 marks are for language, 20 for overall knowledge, including general knowledge, and 20 for aptitude.

Recruiter-1 also said newspapers needed graduates who could articulate their thoughts. Language command comes after years of practice, he said.

All five professionals stressed that those desiring to become sub-editors should have impeccable language skills because they are to clean the mess created by reporters. "They are the last line of defence. Once something wrong is printed, there can be no stopping a lawsuit against the newspaper," said Recruiter-1.

All three recruiters agreed that the graduates from the university had good journalistic skills, but they pointed out that their English language was poor. The recruiters said students should be able to express themselves without confusion if they wanted to be in an editing position.

They revealed that out of 100 candidates they scrutinised, only 10 were up to the mark. "We have to wait for one or two years before we find a suitable person," said Recruiter-1. He said their organisation recently found a replacement for a sub-editor nine months after the position fell vacant. He revealed this was the norm, not the exception, in English newspapers. He also disclosed that their foreign desk had been without two copy editors for more than one year.

Recruiter-2 said if a candidate could not translate at all, he was not hired because newspapers, policy documents, court judgments, international news stories, and many other source materials have to be translated from English to Urdu.

He said if there were two candidates, one would be hired with the skill to translate. He stated that competent translators were hard to find. In the past, there were people who could translate a news item within 20 minutes. "Now people take 40 minutes to do the same," he said.

Writing: All participants were in agreement about the poor writing skills of mass communication graduates. Teacher-2 said that 90 percent of the students did not know grammar, not even the basics. He said

one of his Final Year students thoughts there were eight vowels in English and that many did not even know when to add s or es to the first form of the verb.

He claimed that it was not possible to teach grammar at the university level. If university teachers were to teach grammar, they would not have the time to teach journalism skills. He said headlines are often passive such as "one killed". But the students write like that even in the body instead of writing "one has been killed" because they do not know the difference between active voice and passive voice. He said their focus was on teaching the structure of news reports. He said university teachers could point out the language mistakes and tell the students to correct them, but they could not make them practise those structures at home.

The teachers blamed students' unwillingness to work hard for their lack of language competence. They argued that it was not possible for them to check 30 students' work every day during editing or creative writing classes.

Teacher-2 said: "The language teaching system at schools is faulty. English teachers themselves do not know English well enough. One teacher was found

pronouncing the silent l in Holmes of Sherlock Holmes. There is no accountability for teachers at the school level. Children are given 98 percent marks at primary and secondary levels, which makes parents happy. They do not care to know if their children have really learnt anything."

Moreover, Teacher-1 said that a functional English course was taught, but that was like teaching class-5 material to people who were in the 15th class, so it was nearly useless. Language has to be learnt at a young age, he emphasised.

The two professionals blamed their teachers for their lack of English language proficiency. Professional-1 said their teachers used to stress acquiring journalism skills, arguing that their English language mistakes would be corrected by the sub-editors when they entered the profession and became reporters. He said the teachers disregarded the fact that many of their students wanted to be in editing positions from day one.

Professional-1 also claimed that the teachers who taught news writing in English were themselves not good at English. Mostly, they would tell students how to write a crime report which requires minimal vocabulary

and knowledge of a few structures of the language.

Professional-1 recalled that in the test he took for his first journalism job, 11 mistakes were identified: in using verbs, prepositions, articles, and tenses. He said he had to take tuition to learn how to write news stories in English.

Professional-2 claimed that there was no particular mechanism to improve students' English at the university. Students were given stories to rewrite, but rarely did the teacher identify any grammar mistakes on an individual basis. There was no course to teach how to write well in English. "Weak students do not get as much attention as they should. All students do not have the same set of skills," he argued.

Recruiter-1 said many mass communication graduates have knowledge in their heads, but they cannot express themselves clearly.

All three recruiters said it was easy to teach journalism, but teaching language was not. The two recruiters working for English language dailies said they could teach journalism in six months but could not teach the English language even in six years.

Recruiter-3 said most journalism graduates seeking to work for English newspapers had poor English skills. They did not even know the basics of the language, such as how to use articles and prepositions, he argued. He also said that most of the candidates failed to write sentences coherently even though they were able to speak fluently. Fresh graduates also did not have the knowledge of idioms, he said.

Regarding students' grammar ability, teachers said they did not teach grammar directly. There are reading and writing exercises. Students are taught translation, letter writing, and map reading. If there are errors are being made repetitively, those are identified during classes, Teacher-1 said.

He added that the emergence of social media networks had compounded their problems because students were making punctuation and spelling errors even though they knew the correct ones.

Teacher 1 said there is a course in creative writing and advanced editing in the Final Year for those who are put in the English section. Before that, there were sub-editing and news writing courses during which language errors are corrected when spotted. But there is no lecture specified to

teach grammar points because that cannot be done at this level, argued Teacher 1. Usually, errors in students writing are marked, and they are expected to correct them themselves, Teacher-1 added.

Reading: Both teachers and all the professionals agreed that students' poor writing skills resulted from their lack of reading. Teacher-1 said there was a mental barrier because students did not read much in their day-to-day lives, which also affected their writing. Most students did not study newspapers at all, Teacher-1 complained.

Teacher-2 said he found the English skills of students entering the mass communication programme pathetic as 90 percent did not even have reading comprehension ability. "They can't check contradictory statements in a passage. For example, if in line 1 someone has been called idiot, and in line 7 the same person has been called a genius, they are unable to spot that contradiction," he said.

Recruiter-1 found mass communication graduates "not well read". He said test copies and interviews clearly showed that the candidates did not have the habit of reading books. He further explained that Pakistani students studied for a degree

with notes only which was unthinkable in other countries. "Students want to be spoon-fed. They do not want to work hard," Recruiter-1 said.

All three recruiters said students should read 20-25 books every semester, but they did not do so even during their four-year programme at the university. They blamed the mass communication teachers for this phenomenon, saying the educators were soft on students and presented degrees on a platter.

The recruiters also agreed that journalism graduates' vocabulary was limited because they were not made to read by their teachers. They said it was the responsibility of teachers to ensure that their students were reading daily. They suggested that teachers give students reading tasks and ask in the next class what they had read. "Only then will their vocabulary and understanding develop. Just telling them to read is not enough," Recruiter-1 said.

Professional-2 said teachers just told students to read newspapers, focusing on how the reports were structured, but they never bothered to help students improve their reading habits.

Listening and speaking: The two professionals complained that their teachers paid little attention to improving their listening and speaking skills, although they were essential in journalism.

Professional-1 said students were taught how to interview but to use Urdu language only. No attention was paid to making them capable of interviewing in English, which posed considerable problems when they started working.

Professional-1 said that after years of struggle, he finally became a proficient writer but did not have oral fluency. Initially, he could not interview English-speaking people because there had been no discussions in English in the mass communication department, which could have prepared him for such tasks. And there was no listening exercise.

Professional-2 had the same complaint. He said there was no particular exercise for improving listening or speaking skills. Students were asked to give presentations, but many used to copy and paste, and the teachers did not even bother about that. "It was just reading, not actual communication," he said.

Teacher-1 said it was challenging to arrange listening exercises because of the lack of equipment in the department. But he claimed the teachers did speak in English during the class. He said students were asked to listen to political leaders' speeches to learn where to pause, where to stress, and were to use high pitch. He said he sometimes made his students listen to Martin Luther's speech "I have a dream". He also said a few speaking exercises are conducted during the semester in which students are to speak on some newsworthy issue for a few minutes.

All five journalists, including the three recruiters, said there was a massive gap between what journalism teachers were producing and what the news industry required. They said faculty should know what skills news organisations wanted their graduates to have.

Recruiter-2 said practical work was ignored in the mass communication department. He said teachers mostly gave crime reports to students to write as if it was the only type of news written by journalists.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study has enlightened numerous gaps between what skills the news industry wants and what skills mass

communication graduates possess. It emerged during the course of this study that teachers need to give their students a wide variety of news from such areas as economy, politics, technology, and healthcare so that they become familiar with specific terminology used in these fields. There should be a mandatory English language course for two consecutive semesters which should be taught by qualified English language teachers. Moreover, those people should be employed to teach mass communication who have worked as a journalist.

Besides, teachers should encourage students to speak in English during class interaction. For practice, interviews should be arranged wherein students have to speak in English. Students should be asked to watch English movies and discuss those in class to improve their listening and speaking skills.

To sum up, it has been found that there is a need to design English language courses specifically for journalism students. For that, the mass communication department should seek the assistance of qualified English language teachers. There must be at least two such courses: one for MA Previous/BS Third Year and another for MA Final.

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