

## English for Researchers: A Study of Reference Skills

*Ravindra B. Tasildar*

Assistant Professor, Dept of English,  
S.N. Arts, D.J.M. Commerce and B.N.S. Science College, Sangamner - 422 605  
Dist. Ahmednagar (Maharashtra State), INDIA  
ravishmi1@gmail.com

### *Abstract*

English for Academic Purposes (EAP), one of the dominant branches of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), is the teaching of English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research or teach in that language (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001:8). India has a large scientific research community but is under-represented in international research journals (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998:161). According to Garfield (1982), poor communication in English is often cited as a primary reason. The present paper is an attempt to deal with one of the facets of research in India - the researchers' knowledge of reference sources and reference skills. In this questionnaire-based study, it was found that *academic reference skills* (or research skills) of the researchers in Arts and Science in Indian universities are inadequate. The examination of courses on *Research Methodology* offered in some postgraduate (PG) programmes in Indian universities reveals that the focus of these courses is not on basic research skills. As it is assumed that academic reference skills are learnt automatically, these skills are not incorporated in such courses. The present study emphasizes the need to incorporate reference skills in the courses on research methodology offered in Indian universities.

**Keywords:** ESP, EAP, Reference Skills, Researchers, Indian Universities.

**Bio:** Ravindra B. Tasildar specializes in ELT. He has presented papers in seminars and conferences and has published research articles in national and international journals.

**Introduction**

English for Academic Purposes (EAP), one of the dominant branches of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), is the teaching of English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research or teach in that language (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001:8). The skills essential for a reader to consult the appropriate reference sources and to find out the required information are called reference skills. According to Jordan (1997:208) the reference skills are sometimes sub-divided into language reference skills, which include the efficient use of dictionaries and books and academic reference skills (or research skills), which include library use and giving references in dissertations and theses.

**Review of the studies on researchers**

A large number of researchers in the world prefer English as the language of their research. India has a large scientific research community but is under-represented in international research journals (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998:161). According to Garfield (1982) poor communication in English is often cited as a primary reason for this (as cited in Ramani et al. 1988:82). The present paper deals with one of the facets of research in India - the researchers' knowledge of reference sources and reference skills.

There are quite a few studies on the need to teach 'Research English' (e.g. Swales (1985)). In a study of research scholars in English at Osmania University, Hyderabad, Dheram and Jasti (2002) have noted that as the graduate studies in English in India do not include any project of considerable length, the research students with predominantly literature-oriented Master's course in English are not equipped with the study skills essential for doing research. In a study conducted on twelve postgraduate research students (preferably Ph.D.) Chu and Law (2007) have found that these students were initially unfamiliar with many source types (e.g. theses, conference papers, etc.)

important to their research. Since the study by Dheram and Jasti (2002) was limited to research students in English, the present study is a modest attempt to know about researchers in other subjects.

### **Methodology**

A questionnaire-based study was conducted on a sample size of twenty researchers from Arts and Science faculties from eight universities in the Maharashtra state (India), viz. University of Pune (UoP), Shivaji University, Kolhapur (SUK), Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad (BAMU), North Maharashtra University, Jalgaon (NMU), University of Mumbai (UoM), Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University, Nanded (SRTMU), Rastrasanth Tukadoji Maharaj Nagpur University (RTMNU) and Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nashik (YCMOU). Hereafter these universities are referred to by the abbreviations given in brackets.

The questionnaire, appended to this paper, was divided into two parts: part A dealt with background information of respondents and part B with their academic reference skills.

### **Profile of the respondents**

Fifty questionnaires were sent to researchers in different universities in Maharashtra. Out of the thirty-two questionnaires received, (the section on reference skills being incomplete) twelve questionnaires were unusable. The unusable questionnaires were of the eight researchers (66.66%) who had completed Pre-Ph.D. course (four) and course work for M.Phil. (four). The usable questionnaires were of the twenty researchers (sixteen males and four females), having research experience below five years and working in the colleges affiliated to above eight universities. Among these eleven researchers (55%) were from Science faculty while nine (45%) were from Arts

faculty. Twelve respondents (60%) were working for Ph.D. while five of them (25%) were enrolled for M. Phil. The remaining three (15%) were working on minor and major research projects. Among the fourteen researchers (70%) acquainted with research methodology, nine researchers (45%) had completed course-work in M. Phil. while others attended seminars or workshops on research methodology.

The medium of instruction at the undergraduate (UG) and post graduate (PG) levels was English for sixteen (80%) and eighteen (90%) researchers respectively. Eighteen researchers (90%) felt the need of English language to carry out research in their respective subjects. English was not needed for research purposes only for two researchers from Arts faculty. According to twelve researchers (60%), among the basic skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing - LSRW), reading in English is required most for research.

### **Reference skills of the researchers**

The analysis of academic reference skills of researchers revealed the following points.

- 1) Among sources referred for preparing research proposals, to sixteen respondents (80%) books were the most preferred source of reference. This observation is similar to the findings of Chu and Law (2007).
- 2) Though seventeen researchers (85%) knew meaning of the term 'content', it was found that nine of them (45%) were unable to apply this knowledge. In addition, there was confusion between the terms 'references' and 'bibliography' among ten researchers (50%).
- 3) Eleven researchers (55%) were well acquainted with different parts of a book. However, only six of them (33%) knew about the location of extracts of reviews of books.

- 4) Ten researchers (50%) knew meanings of abbreviations - et al., ed. and pp. whereas fifteen researchers (75%) were not aware of meanings of abbreviations - cf., sic. and opt. cit.
- 5) It was also found that nine researchers (45%) failed to comprehend footnotes.
- 6) Though thirteen researchers (65%) were good at using punctuation marks, the study revealed that eight researchers (40%) were somewhat weak in syntax of English. Besides, ten researchers (50%) failed to respond to the question on syntax. Furthermore, twelve researchers (60%) considered basic skills of English language (LSRW) essential for research in their subjects.

### **Discussion**

Based on analysis of part B of the questionnaire, it could be said that researchers' knowledge of reference sources, other than books, journals and internet, is very limited. It is essential to acquaint them with reference sources other than books and journals. The confusion between terms like *content* and *index* and *references* and *bibliography* and failure of respondents to apply their knowledge of these terms calls for thorough acquaintance with parts of a book. The respondents' inadequate knowledge of abbreviations and their inability to comprehend footnotes used in research writing indicates that there is need to introduce all the essential English and Latin abbreviations to researchers.

Since the present study is based on a relatively small sample, it is descriptive and qualitative. Nevertheless, observations of this study are revealing. Fifteen respondents (75%) do not consider reference skills important for research purposes, nevertheless this study shows that reference skills of these respondents are inadequate. These researchers may not have realized the need to learn reference skills.

### **The place of reference skills in the programmes offered in Indian universities**

Unlike the western countries, separate courses in EAP are rarely offered in India. The EAP components are incorporated in the General English (GE) courses in Indian universities at the UG level. In a survey carried out to know the place of reference skills in the GE courses offered in the universities in Maharashtra, it was found that the UoP was the only university in the state to introduce reference skills, and that too, only for students of final year Arts (from 2000-01 to 2009-10). These skills were not introduced to students of Commerce and Science.

The Curriculum Development Committee (CDC) for English (2001) had suggested 25% credit to 'Textual, editorial and biographical skills' in the optional Paper V combined with study of a genre or study of a period of English literature for the MA (English) programme. However, very few Indian universities offer this paper, for example, Gujarat University and Rani Durgavati University, Jabalpur.

Some universities and university level institutes in Maharashtra have tried to introduce research skills to PG students. For instance, in the UoP there are papers on research methodology for MA (Economics) and M Com and a paper entitled *Doing Research* has been introduced at MA (English) (w.e.f. 2009-10). The UoP also offers a half course entitled *English for Scientists* at M Sc (Zoology). The review of papers on research methodology offered by the UoP reveals that, with the exception of *Doing Research*, there is no formal attempt to acquaint PG students either to reference sources or to reference skills. Similarly, in BAMU, though there are research projects, students of MA (English) are not formally acquainted to research skills.

Besides, focus of papers on *Research Methodology* offered for the M. Phil. (English) programmes in some Indian universities - Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi (approved in Dec. 2000), YCMOU (w.e.f. 2006), SUK (w.e.f. June 2007) and the

University of Madras, Chennai (w.e.f. 2007-08), to name a few - seems to be only on methodology. Reference skills are not incorporated in these papers.

Thus, it can be concluded that since reference sources and reference skills are not introduced at the UG and PG levels, while preparing their research proposals M. Phil. and Ph.D. students do not refer to the sources like dissertations, conference proceedings, encyclopedias, bibliographies, etc.

### **To sum up**

The medium of instruction for most of the PG programmes in Indian universities is English. Moreover, most of the reference sources for all subjects are in English. The Indian students' knowledge of reference sources and reference skills at the UG and PG levels is very dismal. For instance, in a study by Tasildar and Chavan (2010) it was found that only 12% students knew reference sources in their mother tongue (Marathi) and less than 7% students knew reference sources in English. Their knowledge of reference sources is limited to a few bilingual dictionaries only. The study also revealed that the UG students were ill equipped with reference skills. Nevertheless, the assumption that reference skills are learnt automatically has led to the exclusion of these skills in the UG and PG programmes offered in Indian universities.

Currently, research projects have been part of the UG and PG courses in Arts, Commerce, Science, Education, Management, etc. Besides, there are some efforts to promote research culture among Indian students. For instance, *Avishkar*, a state level research competition is organized for the UG, PG and research students from Maharashtra and *Anveshan*, a research convention is held at zonal and national levels for the full time PG and research students of Indian universities / university level institutions. Thus, irrespective of their disciplines, the students seeking higher education need reference skills in English for research purposes. Taking into account needs of

Indian students and role of English as a service language (Saraswathi, 2004: 106), it is essential to incorporate reference skills (including e-resources) in the papers on research methodology offered in Indian universities for the PG students and research scholars.

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### Appendix

## Questionnaire for Researchers

### ❖ Part – A

### General Information

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Address for communication: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Name of the college/Dept: \_\_\_\_\_
4. University to which the college is affiliated: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Educational qualification: \_\_\_\_\_ ( ) Male ( ) Female
6. Subject: \_\_\_\_\_ Area of specialization: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Teaching experience: \_\_\_\_\_ years. Research experience: \_\_\_\_\_ years.
8. Currently studying for ( ) M.Phil. ( ) Ph.D. ( ) Any other \_\_\_\_\_
9. Month and year of registration for research: \_\_\_\_\_
10. Title of the research project undertaken: \_\_\_\_\_
11. What was your medium of instruction at undergraduate level?  
( ) Marathi ( ) English ( ) Hindi ( ) Any other \_\_\_\_\_
12. What was your medium of instruction at Post Graduate level?  
( ) English ( ) Marathi ( ) Any other \_\_\_\_\_
13. Do you require English to carry out your research in your subject? ( ) Yes ( ) No
14. Which skills in **English** you **may need** most for **your research**?  
(Write your preference as 1 2 3 4)  
( ) Listening ( ) Speaking ( ) Reading ( ) Writing
15. Are you acquainted with research methodology? ( ) Yes ( ) No  
If yes, have you ( ) completed Pre-Ph.D. course?  
( ) completed theory/ course work for M. Phil.?  
( ) attended an orientation course on Research Methodology?  
( ) attended Seminar/Workshop on Research Methodology?  
( ) Any other, specify \_\_\_\_\_.

❖ Part – B **Reference Skills**

16. Mention the reference types/sources that you have referred to while preparing research proposal:  
 i) \_\_\_\_\_ ii) \_\_\_\_\_  
 iii) \_\_\_\_\_ iv) \_\_\_\_\_
17. A list of topics arranged in a sequential manner given in the beginning of a book is  
 ( ) Index. ( ) Contents. ( ) Appendix. ( ) Glossary.
18. A list of sources on the subject of an article, not just the ones that have been cited in a paper is  
 ( ) Footnote ( ) References ( ) Bibliography ( ) Endnote
19. Give the full forms for the following:  
 et al. \_\_\_\_\_ op. cit. \_\_\_\_\_  
 cf \_\_\_\_\_ ed. \_\_\_\_\_  
 sic. \_\_\_\_\_ pp. \_\_\_\_\_
20. Where would you find the following information about a book?  
 i) The year of publication of the book \_\_\_\_\_  
 ii) The purpose for which the book has been written \_\_\_\_\_  
 iii) The page number of a chapter of the book \_\_\_\_\_  
 iv) A list of explanations of words used in a book \_\_\_\_\_  
 v) Extracts of the reviews about the book \_\_\_\_\_
21. Read the footnotes given below and answer the following questions:  
 1 Shaver, H., 1997, *Malaria and the Political Economy of Public Health*, pp. 557-9  
 2 Ibid., p. 623.  
 3 Ibid.  
 4 Calder, R. 1964, *Two Way Passage: A Study of the Give and Take of International Aid, passim.*  
 5 Shaver, op. cit., p. 563.  
 6 Cf. in this connection of the work of P. Goubert.  
 7 Djukanovic, V., et al., 1957, ‘Alternative Approaches to Meeting Basic Health Needs in Developing Countries’, *WHO Technical Report*, no. 392, p. 6.  
 8 Jackson, R. (ed.), 1960, *Preventive Medicine in World War II*, vol. 1, p. 47.  
 9 Ibid., vol. II, p. 69.  
 10 Edmonds, R. T., 1983, ‘The ineffectiveness of DDT Residual Spraying in the Jordan Valley’, MS, University of Amman.
- (i) What is the title of the work referred to in footnote 3?  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- (ii) When was the book referred to in footnote 9 published?  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- (iii) Why is the title of the work referred to in footnote 10 not in italics?  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- (iv) Why is there no reference to a page number in footnote 3?  
 \_\_\_\_\_

22. Correct the following sentences using Proof Correction Symbols/Marks and Rewrite these sentences.

- i) Every man has in him the possi bility.      ii) Every Man has in him the possibility. \_\_\_\_\_
- iii) Every man in him has the possibility.      iv) Every mans possibilities lie within him. \_\_\_\_\_

23. Which skills in **English** you **may need** most for **your research**?

*(Write your preference as 1 2 3 4)*

- ( ) Language skills – (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing)
- ( ) Study skills – (Note-taking, Note-making, Summarizing)
- ( ) Presentation skills – (Seminar, Group discussion)
- ( ) Reference skills – (Using a library, Using quotations, Preparing a bibliography)

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