

Tussle for ‘Standards’ in ESL Writing in India: A Study of School English Teachers’ Insistence on ‘Correctness’ and ‘Appropriateness’

Deepesh Chandrasekharan
The EFL University
deepesh.chandrasekharan@gmail.com

Though both writing and speaking are means of producing language, writing is generally accorded greater status by teachers because it is recorded and therefore more permanent. Unlike speech, which is decided based on the actual listener, writing usually involves taking into account not the actual reader but an imagined reader. In most academic contexts however, students write knowing that their teacher is the reader. Therefore, such writing bears the burden of inviting bigger scrutiny by teachers who are very particular about ‘correctness’ and adherence to ‘standards’. Several scholars have questioned this insistence on ‘appropriateness’ and ‘correctness’ (Fairclough (1992), Clark and Ivanic (1997)) and have pointed out how social judgments about intelligence and ‘educatedness’ are made on the basis of ‘physical’ aspects like handwriting, spelling and punctuation or depending on the grammaticality of sentence structures.

Schools are known to uphold the notions of ‘correctness’ and ‘standards’. In the grassroots-multilingual Indian context, questions need to be asked about the importance school English teachers place on these aspects while assessing their students’ writing and about how consistent each teacher’s view of ‘standard’ is with that of the others.

The paper reports the findings of a qualitative study involving school English teachers’ perception of ‘correctness’ and ‘standard English’ and the importance they laid on spelling, punctuation, handwriting and grammatical correctness. It uses sample answers by learners and points out the inconsistencies and subjectivities that are found in understanding ‘correctness’ and ‘standards’ and problematizes them. It also investigates the need for teachers to take into account use-related aspects like context, purpose, identity and social relations and tries to analyze if possibly more important aspects of writing such as the choice of wording and the style of writing are neglected in the keenness to be normative.

Key words: *Standards, Correctness, Grammar, ESL writing, Indian schools*