

Does The Academic Environment Affect Students' Language Writing Ability? An Investigation

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Abstract

Aim and objectives: The present study investigates the relationship between academic environment and students' performance on English writing skills during covid 19 pandemic break. It addresses the following two research questions. (a)What is the impact of academic environment on writing in English language of high school students? (b)What are some strategies to mitigate English language learning loss due to the pandemic? **Methodology:** In this study (n=120) mixed level English as second language learners from high school were selected randomly. The writing skills test was performed on the students designed on the syllabus that was taught before the COVID 19 pandemic break. Selected student's writing skill was measured with the help of semi structured questionnaire. **Data and analysis:** The analysis of the students' writing performance was done using descriptive analysis. The manual screening of the test results and analysis using EViews software and Microsoft excel was carried out. **Findings:** The analysis revealed the directly proportional relationship between the academic environment and the English writing skills competence. The break from academic environment lowered the student's competence to use proper tense, word spelling, sentence formation and their vocabulary enhancement was restricted, occurrence of mother tongue found on students writing whose parents do not speak in English at home etc. **Originality:** The existing research in English language teaching (ELT) has not studied the impact on the relationship between academic environment and writing in English during the pandemic period. A study with measures including sub skills using the survey method is a novel contribution in the field of English language teaching. **Significance:** The study provides an insight on the state of writing skills in English, suggests mitigation strategies that will help administrators, teachers and students in improving their English language writing skill.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, Writing Skill, Academic Environment, Covid 19 Pandemic, Second Language Production

1. Introduction

A unique aspect of human cognitive and social development is language (Kashyap, 2021). Since language is highly specialized system it has the following channels of communication: speech, that resembles vocalized communication; writing and; kinesthetics which is itself a full-fledged language

(Kashyap, 2021). Language aids in the construction of knowledge (John, 2019). Languages as a whole are dynamic and constantly change through time and space.

Across all cultural and geographical contexts, English has prevailed. The English language has undergone considerable changes from its inception, with its origins in the Germanic tribal

invasions (Prasad, Shobha & Singh, Vikramjit, 2021). The versatility and absorbent vocabulary of English is one of the key factors in its popularity and supremacy around the world. The use of English as a language is a window into the globe (Lilly Golda, 2010). English predominates in the worldwide conversation around academia, economics, politics and diplomacy, technology, tourism, etc. Today's generations depend on the internet, which is primarily run in English. For the first, second, and foreign English language research fraternity across the world, study in the area of English language teaching and learning is a relevant, trending, and eternal research topic. This is due to the language's undeniable ubiquity and relevance.

English language proficiency may be attained by placing a strong emphasis on the four subskills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

English Writing Skill

Amongst the four skills stated above, writing is a social skill and not a biological attribute (Connor, 2013). It was invented around 6,000 years ago (Connor, 2013). It is the most functional adaptation of language. Florian Coulmas (2003) in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems* defines a writing system as:

“A set of visible or tactile signs used to represent units of language in a systematic way, with the purpose of recording messages which can be retrieved by everyone who knows the language in question and the rules by virtue of which its units are encoded in the writing system.” (Coulmas, 2003)

The Impact of Pandemic Break on The Writing Skill

Writing in English involves guided instruction and insightful criticism from teachers (Said, 2010). This is accomplished in a classroom setting. However, the unusual COVID-19 pandemic caused school cancellations in 108

nations on average, which cost students 10 weeks of face-to-face learning (UNESCO, UNICEF & World Bank, 2020). International evidence from the Responses to Educational Disruption Survey (REDS), which was conducted by UNESCO and released in 2022, was utilised as secondary material for this study to examine the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on education. The research, which covers 11 countries in Africa, Asia, the Arab world, Europe, and Latin America, is the most recent and comprehensive data source regarding the pandemic's effects on schooling.

Writing was given less focus in the language classroom before the pandemic than speaking and reading in English, despite the rigorous and complicated nature of the skill. This was true even during regular school hours (Sim, 2010). Additionally, despite the fact that studying a language is a means of acquiring information and skills, it currently receives less attention and classroom time than scientific and social science disciplines. English language acquisition was more negatively impacted by faraway pandemics. On the other hand, English writing requires specialized teaching (Dyan, 2010), which wasn't provided during the pandemic vacation from the academic setting, according to the findings of the survey that was done.

Academic Environment and Language

In addition to learning English in the classroom, children who come from wealthy families may also study English as a second language at home (bilingualism) in addition to their mother tongue. Thus, the process of acquiring a language involves both instructors and parents working together, and a child's surroundings has a significant impact on how quickly they pick up a language. Many academics believe that an academic setting helps students learn more quickly and grow more fully. Development of cognitive abilities is impacted by isolation from the academic environment. Everyone on the planet was forced to stay inside due of the Covid 19 pandemic. Online learning

replaced face-to-face instruction throughout the whole learning environment (Said, 2010).

The use of technology-assisted learning helped to reduce the small percentages of student writing in English that were negatively impacted. It is widely acknowledged that the entire teaching and learning process, which depends on technology, is not for the child's overall development. Physical social interactions and culturally influenced elements provide the context. For kids, this social connection develops in a classroom setting.

The academic setting offers a place to practise language skills, facilitates experience learning, and encourages peer suggestions and corrections. Due to the gap from social engagement, context-based language acquisition was lost. Therefore, substituting technology-based learning for the classroom setting is not a solution to the kids' learning issues. The major causes of the disruption in education in south Asian nations include restricted access to gadgets, poor or no internet connectivity, and minimal teacher engagement (Gupta, 2021).

Since communication is language's primary function, pandemic isolation has brought attention to the importance of language and communication since language may also obstruct learning in fields like social science and science. The unexpected 2019 pandemic has disrupted the academic environment, which has changed the growing scenario for both English language production and acquisition. As a result, the current study focuses on identifying the relationship and correlation between the academic setting and students' ability to produce English language, with a particular focus on stress and vacation caused by the pandemic.

Even for native English speakers who are proficient, learning how to write in English is difficult. However, sensitive guided tactics and special concentration can aid in the learner's development of the necessary English

writing skills. In the modern day, when the COVID 19 epidemic has compelled students to use new teaching methods, it may be interesting to examine the link between the academic environment, English language writing proficiency, and gender-based performance of high school students.

2. Objectives of the study

1. To study the impact of academic environment on writing in English language of high school students
2. To analyze the gender-based performance of high school students in post pandemic context
3. Suggest strategies to mitigate English language learning loss due to the pandemic

3. Research Methodology

The study was conducted using questionnaire based on the pre pandemic syllabus that was already taught to the selected sample. The sample size was 120 high school students. The sample was divided into two groups based on the grade of the students, 8th and 9th grade. The respective groups had equal representation from female and male students. Both the groups comprised of students having mixed levels of English language writing competence.

The research tool used for the study was a semi structured questionnaire designed on the basis of the CBSE syllabus. According to (Omer, 2015) semi structured questionnaire provides framework for carrying out the qualitative research in a systematic way. The questionnaire included questions grouped as follows- Q1 was designed to test the vocabulary, Q2 for spelling, Q3 for testing sentence formation, Q4 to test tense and Q5 was an unstructured question to check the sentence construction skill of the students. Two sets of questionnaires were designed for the two groups based on the previous year's syllabus that was taught to them during the pre-covid pandemic academic year. The data was analyzed with the help of manual

screening of test results and results were drawn with the help of EViews software.

4. Literature Review

Various researches have been carried out in the field of L2 acquisition and production. (Nor, 2018) described L2 as referring to two things, “first the study of individuals or groups who are learning a language ensuing their L1 which they have learned as children and second, the process of learning of that particular language.” English as second language has been studied and continues to be studied due to its undeniable significance in the contemporary generation. The general focus of the research carried out in this area has been inclined towards English language speaking compared to the writing in English as second language which has not been researched extensively. According to (Chastain, 1988) writing is an important communication skill whose role is essential in second language learning process. English being the lingua franca invites the attention and thus writing in English gains similar weightage. Some linguists provided inputs on the process of learning English language writing which requires experiential learning and is based on outcome-based learning combining instruction, feedback and self-motivation for optimum accuracy. English language writing competency is a result of focused attention given by the teacher on grammatical and mechanical mistakes of the students as observed by (Hedgcock, John & Lefkowitz, Natalie, 1994) in their survey on feedback.

Various theories put forth by linguistics and psychologists illustrate the evolution of understanding developmental stages of human languages. Bandura’s theory of social cognitive learning proposed that language is learned through imitation (Levine, Laura E. & Munsch, Joyce, 2018). This theory emphasized the role of imitation and mentioned that imitation is central to language learning. As opposed to this in one of the earliest contributions to the language theories, the prominent linguist Noam

Chomsky (1968) said that language acquisition is something which human brain is naturally designed for rather human brain is innately wired to learn language. This theory of nativism also known as the Universal grammar theory of Chomsky met different reactions amongst the language researchers. Another theorist, B. F. Skinner (1991) based on the original principal given by Ivan Pavlov stated that language is shaped through operant conditioning. This theory brought the reinforcement principle to light. According to Lev Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory focused on the role of interaction in learning. Learning first takes place through interaction between people and this leads to collaborative learning. Multiple theorists proposed multiple perspectives on language learning and exposed the language research scenario to varied models. A combination of imitation and reinforcement is of our concern for the present study. The study finds relation of academic environment which is a place for English as second language reinforcement and imitation in terms of writing skill. Jean Piaget’s theory on the classical conditioning for child’s cognitive development also helps in understanding the ideal cognitive development graph in normal conditions. The normalcy of this theory is under investigation in this research.

Writing is a fine motor (Levine, Laura E.& Munsch, Joyce, 2018) productive skill (Sulistyo, T., Mukminatien, N., Cahyono, B., & Saukah, A., 2019) which needs speaking and reading as inputs. Better readers are better writers. But, L2 reading to L2 writing is not a straightforward process. Neither the transfer from L1 writing to L2 writing a straightforward process. Hence, specific instruction is needed to master the linguistic and rhetoric constraints of writing in English language (Hyland, Ken & Shaw, Philip, 2016). In order to attain writing competence, the learner must master the major writing sub skills. Grammar, vocabulary, spellings, sentence construction and arrangement, punctuation, tense are some of the prerequisite subskills to attain English writing

proficiency (John, 2019). The sub skills of writing are the building blocks to attaining writing competence. Specific attention to these sub skills with a bottom-up approach while teaching can be challenging for the instructor but cumulatively results in better performance on writing scale. Vocabulary is a list or collection of words or number of words a person knows according to the definition given in Merriam Webster dictionary. Large vocabulary size usually represented well-structured semantic schema and better performance in word/character meaning identification (Dong, 2020). Noah Webster described spelling skill that it is the foundation of reading and the ornament of writing (Pan, 2021). Spelling is critical in job interview (Christensen, David S. & Rees, David, 2002); affects the impact of advertising, websites and review (Everard, Andrea & Galletta, Dennis F., 2014); and it impacts the perception towards the writer (Barker, O. & Puente, M., 2013). Thus, spelling skill is highly important even in the century of textism, spellcheckers and technology proliferated writing (Pan, 2021). Thus, teaching spelling is a relevant skill and it requires a guided input mechanism on part of the teacher and the peer. Sentences are combined together with the rules of syntax subject-verb-object agreement (Dalrymple, 2001).

There are multiple reasons for the weakness of English second language writing skill amongst students. (Gupta, D., & Woldemariam, G. S., 2011) suggested the motivation towards writing as the instrumental component in mastering English language writing skill accuracy. Reductionist approach, apprehension or fear of writing, large size of writing class and disintegration of print culture are some major factors that prevent student's writing competence according to (Javadi-Safa, 2018).

Studies by a Chinese linguist highlighted the significance of academic environment with particular focus on the role of teacher in development of English language writing skill. They pointed out the varied impact of peer

discussion, teacher-lead discussion and no-discussion on writing skill and concluded that the process of writing could be thrived with teacher stimuli in the academic environment. Rashid (2011) pointed out that if the L2 learners are exposed to a nurturing and nonthreatening environment, they are most likely succeeding in learning L2.

However, the break from academic environment of students has resulted in unlearning and learning loss. This is being highlighted by international bodies like UNESCO and World Bank. Role of teacher through various classroom management practices and language teaching instruments has become online from face-to-face (Said, 2010). The reception of the virtual, remote, and no teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic vacation on English as second language learning and writing to be more specific has not been studied so far. Academic success of a students is dependent on the academic environment of the students. It is an important antecedent of achievement. The demanding and feedback-oriented nature of English Writing skill makes it need guidance at an academic setting (Finn, Jeremy D. & Rock, Donald A., 1997). (Research, 2020) in the study found that the use of various teaching strategies mitigates learning loss and facilitates performance of students on English language learning, speaking and writing. Specific cognitive interventions thrive the writing skill in English. According to Raj (1980), components of writing have six grids. They are grammaticality, appropriateness and acceptability, logicity and organization, punctuation and spelling, consistency in style and creativity and use of idioms and phrases. There are multiple studies conducted on particular sub skills of writing like punctuation, spelling, vocabulary by linguists. But the impact of academic environment or their mutual relationship on these particular writing sub skills has not been explored extensively by the ELT language researchers.

5. Data Analysis

120 test respondent scores were analyzed with the help of manual screening. Vocabulary, spelling check, tense and sentence formation were manually screened. The number of scores achieved by each participant were grouped into range based on that particular measure segment. Excel was used for descriptive analysis. The Pearson X2 results for 8th grade vocabulary measure ($r = 7.467775$), spelling measure ($r=13.2975$), tense measure ($r=9.535604$) and sentence arrangement measure ($r=7.447911$) and for 9th grade vocabulary measure ($r = 7.276884$), spelling measure ($r=4.765083$), tense measure ($r=12.22031$) and sentence arrangement measure ($r = 7.276884$).

6. Results

6.1. Effect on Vocabulary Measure

Test scores for both the groups were analyzed with the help of manual vocabulary check. The descriptive statistics showed the performance of 8th and 9th grade students on vocabulary measure Q1. The performance of both the groups is plotted in table2 and 2.1 showing performance of 8th and 9th grade respectively. The gender wise performance in both the groups showed mixed female and male students results in vocabulary measure. The overall results showed the maximum score in 8th grade was ‘three’ which showed the performance of the students on vocabulary test was average. For 9th grade the average score was zero

showing poor performance on vocabulary scale. 8th grade students were given 5 vocabulary-based questions where pair of the correct meaning of given words was asked. Wounded=Severely injured, awoke=get up from sleep, forgive=pardon, faithful=loyal and pity=feel sorry for, were the expected results. But surprisingly students came up with responses like; wounded=pardon, awoke=severely injured, forgive= got up from sleep et cetera. However, only 15.25% 8th grade students could score 100% on this test. 17.86% female students and 12.9% male students scored 100%. Female students outperformed male students on vocabulary test.

On the other hand, 9th grade students were given three questions where antonyms of Decline and Overjoyed and synonym of Kind were asked. The expected answers were, increase/accept; sad/depressed; gentle, caring, loving, good-hearted, mild. Some of the interesting responses received for antonym of decline were improvement, earth, agreed. For antonym of overjoyed some responses received were-enjoy, over annoyed, happy. For synonym of kind students answered humble/cruel/jealous/helpful. 22.03% of total 9th grade students could score 100% in the vocabulary measure test. 18.75% Female and 25.93% male students scored 100%. Thus, male students from 9th grade performed better than female students on vocabulary test.

Table2. 8th Grade vocabulary measure.

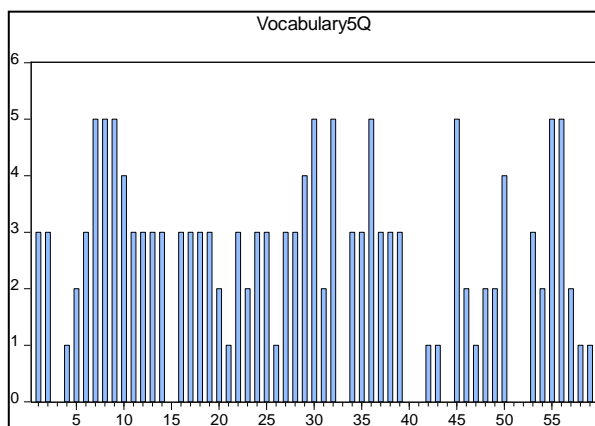


Table 2.1 9th Grade Vocabulary measure.

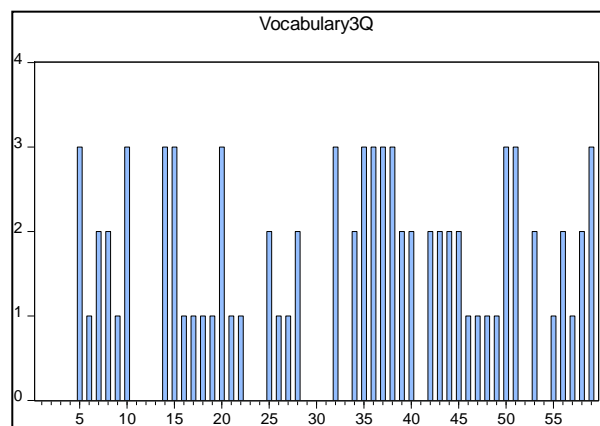


Table2.2 Descriptive statistics of vocabulary measure-

Measure	Groups	N	Treatment Mean	SD
Vocabulary	8th grade	59	2.5254	1.5465
	9th grade	59	1.4068	1.116

6.2. Effect on Spelling Measure

The sample selected from 8th grade were given another test followed by the vocabulary test question Q1, based on spellings Q2. For 8th grade, the question included six words based on the 7th grade English textbook. The words were given with random blank space and students were asked to write the correct spelling. The expected answers were, helmet, mantle, palanquin, portable, quality and license. Some responses by the students were- helmat, qealyte, partecle. Amongst the 59 respondents 3.39% students (Table3.0.) could correctly spell all the words. Amongst these, 6.45% male students and 0% female students could score 100% on spelling test. Thus, the overall student performance was marked poor on this particular section where male students performed better than the female students in 8th grade.

9th grade students were given six words. The expected correct spellings of the words were, christmas, archipelago, famine, geography, grasshopper, tsunami. These words were taken from 8th grade English NCERT textbook which the 9th grade students studied in the previous year before the pandemic break. Some of the interesting responses by the students were- chrosomes, archeology, femini, tusnami. The performance of the students from 9th grade was, 10.17% students (Table3.1) could spell 100% without error. Amongst these, 15.63% were male and 3.7% were female students who scored 100% on spelling test. This shows that male students performed better than female students even though the overall performance by the entire group was poor. Staying away from academic environment impacted the spelling memory of the students. In both the grades, male outperformed female students for spelling test.

Table3.0. 8th Grade Spelling Measure

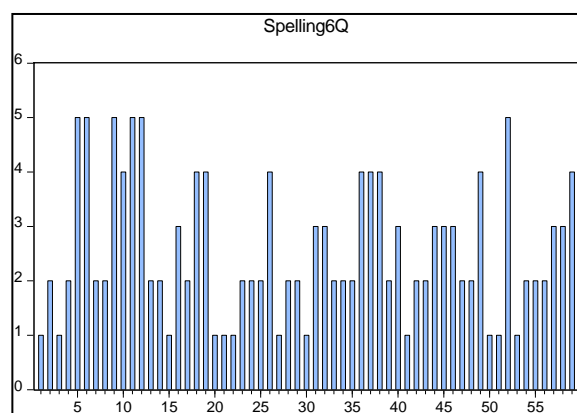


Table3.1. 9th Grade Spelling Measure

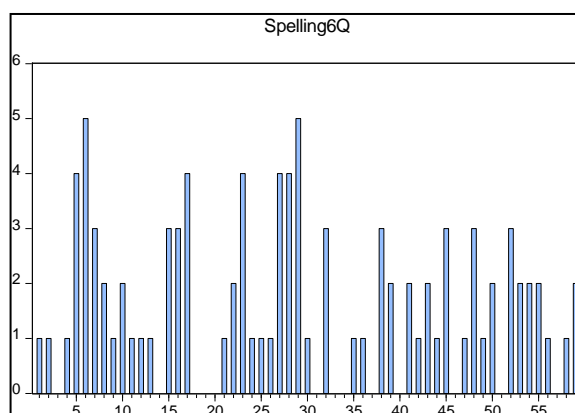


Table3.2. Descriptive Statistics for Spellings

Measure	Groups	N	Treatment Mean	SD
Spellings	8th grade	59	1.627119	1.37588
	9th grade	59	2.559322	1.263154

6.3 Effect on Sentence formation

Three incorrectly arranged sentences were given to 8th grade students to rearrange in proper order and construct grammatically sound sentences. 11.86% of the total students studying in 8th grade could construct the sentences correctly. Amongst these, 16.13% were male and 7.14% were female students. Students faced difficulty in using proper connectives, understanding the subject verb agreement and correct use of tense forms. As a part of sentence arrangement test students were

asked to write a paragraph on a given topic. Students' writings were observed to show a grammatical error in which they apply language rule to words that don't follow that rule or pattern which is known as overregularization (Levine, Laura E. & Munsch, Joyce, 2018).

The performance of students from 9th grade was as follows, 5.08% students could form the sentences correctly. 1.63% Male and 1.37% Female students could form the sentences grammatically correct.

Table.4.0. 8th Grade Sentence formation

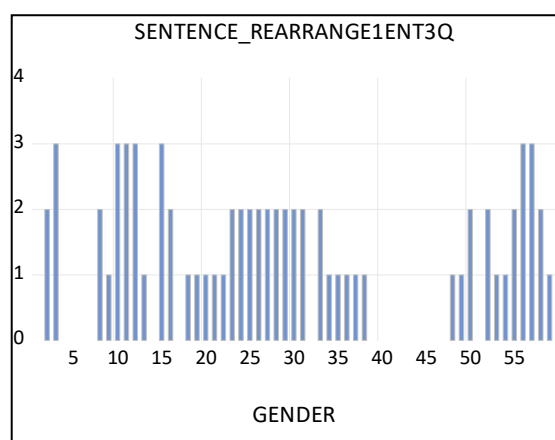
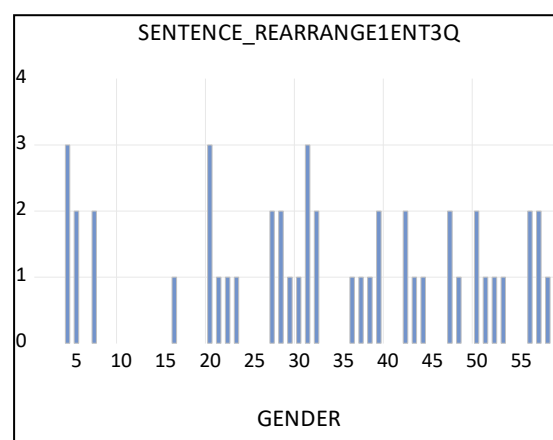


Table4.1. 9th Grade Sentence formation



Descriptive Statistics for Sentence Formation:

Measure	Groups	N	Treatment Mean	SD
Sentence Arrangement	8th grade	59	1.220339	1.474576
	9th grade	59	0.813559	0.918668

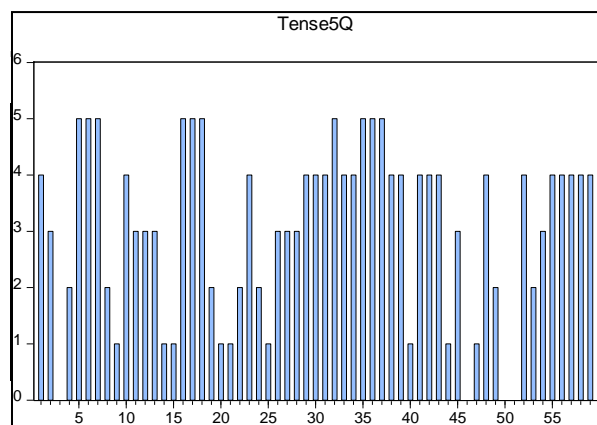
6.4 Effect on Tenses

For testing the appropriate use of tenses 'fill in the blanks with correct form of the given verb'

was administered. For 8th grade, five words were given to be used in correct verb form, correct tense of the verb. The given verbs were; sit, read, sit, sharpe and write. The expected verb forms were, sitting (sit + ing); reading (read+ing); sitting (sit+ing); sharpening (sharpe+ing); writing (write+ing). All the tenses administered were Present Continuous tense. 16.95% students could write the correct tense of the verbs. Amongst these, 19.35% were male students and 14.29% were female students. On tense measure test also, male students performed better than female students from 8th grade.

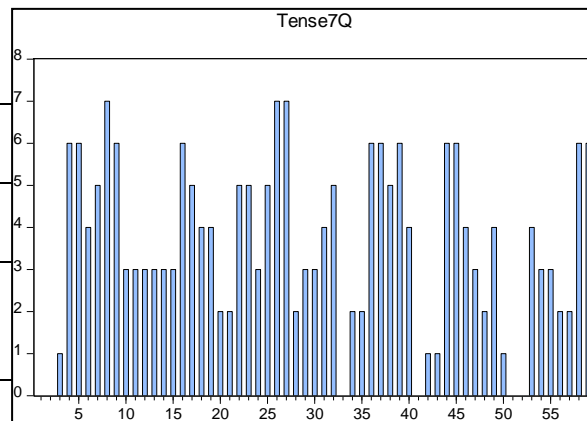
Seven verbs were given in blank spaces provided in a paragraph for tense measure test for 9th grade students. The given verbs were; come, tear, ask, happen, say, have and quarrel. The expected error free answers were; came (pastV2); torn (pastV2); asked(pastV2); happened(pastV2); said(pastV2); had(pastV2); quarreled (past V2). 5.08% students could score 100% on appropriate use of tenses in the given sentences. 9.38% male and 0%female students could score 100% on tense measure. It can be concluded from the above results that the male students performed better than female students and used the correct tense in the given sentences.

Table 4.0. Grade8th Tenses Measure



Based on the data collected with the help of the questionnaire the performance of the students was grouped on the basis of English language writing sub skills. The sub skills included were vocabulary, tense, spelling, sentence

Table 4.1. 9th Grade Tenses Measure



construction and rearrangement. Questionnaires for 8th and 9th grade respectively showed results unique to both the groups. Students' performance on overall subskills can be seen as follows,

Table5

English writing subskill	8th grade Percentage of 100% scorers	8th grade 100% scorers	9th grade Percentage of 100% scorers	9th grade 100% scorers
1. Vocabulary	15.25%	12.9%Male 17.86%Female	22.03%	18.75%Male 25.93%Female
2. Spelling	3.39%	6.45%Male 0%Female	10.17%	15.63%Male 3.7%Female
3. Tense	16.95%	19.35%Male 14.29%Female	5.08%	9.38%Male 0%Female

4.Sentence Formation	11.86%	16.13%Male 7.14%Female	5.08%	1.63%Male 1.37%Female
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*Above data is not to be seen in comparative way.

6.6 Strategies to mitigate English language learning loss

The interviews of the school teachers and parents of the students revealed that the reduced guided monitoring towards students due to the distance mode is the major factor for the low performance of students on the writing test. Incorporation of interactive online material (Nugrohoi, 2020), use of artificial intelligence, innovative teaching practices, increased writing practice along with integration of diverse literary material in teaching (Cole, Jenny & Feng, Jay, 2015) can help students attain writing competence.

Students unlearned what they had learnt in the previous year classroom due to the break. The students belonging to rural, underprivileged backgrounds who were at greater risk of learning loss lacked access to mobile phones and internet connection leaving many students out of classroom permanently. The students who had access to mobile phones and internet connection were observed to be facing difficulty in spelling correct words and vocabulary due to increased dependence on use of auto correct features in the devices. The increased screen time and reduced writing hours affected handwriting of the students. Introducing remedial learning, increasing internet bandwidth and providing learning and writing workbooks and material to the students can support students learning. Reopening of schools, teachers training for the unforeseen circumstances. The increased stay at home affected the English language learning due to bilingualism (Müller, 2020). The writeups in sentence formation had occurrence of many Hindi and Marathi words which can be overcome by teacher instruction and sensitive evaluation.

6.7 Inferences

The results of the survey demonstrate that the academic setting is a key element in how well students' writing skills improve. The break from the academic environment affected the writing skill in English language significantly. According to the chosen sample, as shown in table 5, male eighth grade students performed better than female students on all of the subskill measures. Yet, when compared to the female pupils, male students from the ninth grade outperformed them on all subskill metrics except for sentence formulation. Hence, it can be said that male students were less affected by their time away from the classroom than female students were. There were very few students from both grades who performed well and represented both genders. Students from privileged families, those whose parents speak English, and those who are motivated by themselves were seen to do better than the majority of the class. Both pupils who do well and those who perform poorly exhibit below average overall performance.

Students' vocabulary suffered, spellings were mispronounced, and proper tenses were not employed. Students from both grades wrote test paragraphs that had inconsistent thinking and idea flow, inappropriate use of tenses, inaccurate spelling, and a lack of knowledge of sentence structure. The performance on this phase was poor for both genders.

Students' learning suffered as a result of the pandemic break that caused them to withdraw from the classroom. Much learning has been lost. Both the home and the classroom are places where language learning occurs. Nonetheless, the mother tongue is the most common language spoken at home by most students (Bilingualism). Because of this, learning and producing English as a second language is not done effectively. Mother language has a significant impact in many

situations. Hence, it is impossible to dispute the importance of the academic setting in the formation of English. Language is English. Hence, it can be argued that the break from the academic environment had a negative impact on high school students' ability to write in the English language.

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6.9 Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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