

## LSRW Skills for Higher Learning

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LSRW—Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing—skills are taught in isolation in India, mostly addressing the examination and certification needs of students. As a result, the teaching and learning of these skills often forget or take for granted the goals of our education system. Therefore, the present article reflects on the role of LSRW skills in Indian higher education and suggests that teaching skills should be in tune with the educational goals. It, thus, explores the connection between language learning skills and higher learning goals. This article is written learners in mind; it is addressed to students. Therefore, its tone is that of moralizing, which is against my conviction. Paradoxes and anomalies need to be placed in the proper context and framework.

**Dear students,**

### University Education

The aim of university education, whether it is under-graduate or post-graduate or doctoral (PhD), is to produce knowledge about this world. This mode of producing knowledge is called research. Two pertinent questions are: what is research and why should you be prepared for research studies? Research is nothing but understanding our world scientifically. To understand something scientifically is to achieve understanding of the world rationally and empirically. Higher education is really about training you to produce scientific knowledge about the world. Now, we need to know what our world consists of and how we produce knowledge about it. Let us try to understand it better.

Our universe consists of the natural world— the solar system, physical and natural objects among others. This natural world, as we commonly understand it, is studied by scientists. Scientists such as Physicists, Chemists and Botanists study the natural world. The subjects they study (Physics, Chemistry, Biology) are called Natural Sciences.

In this natural world, there is a human world too—the world and reality created by human beings. You must remember that humans are creators; human beings produce society, political systems, literary works, languages, films, economic systems and many other things.

The study of these human creations comes under the domain of the Human Sciences. If the study of the natural world is called Natural Sciences, the study of the human world is called Human Sciences.

The Human Sciences can further be divided into Humanities and Social Sciences. In Humanities we include disciplines like Philosophy, History, Language and Literature, and in Social Sciences we include Sociology, Economics and Political Science. It is we humans who make these classifications.

The point you need to understand is that all natural sciences like Physics, Chemistry and Botany produce knowledge about the natural world and the Human Sciences produce knowledge about the human world. At this moment, you have to understand that producing knowledge means gaining understanding about this world; what in Kannada is called *tilivalike*. The question then is: how do we produce knowledge about the world?

We need to make inquiries into the world in order to produce knowledge about it. The world does not always reveal itself to us. We need to think about the world and observe it meticulously. By thinking and studying thus, we produce ideas about this world, both about the natural world and the human world. Ultimately, the purpose of university education is to involve students in thinking, generating ideas and producing knowledge about the world around us. Colleges are also part of the university education system and, therefore, they should also awaken in you a thinker, a lover of ideas and a knowledge maker. For example, in Political Science, we think about political systems—how are we governed? In Sociology, we try to understand how societies are formed; in Economics, we explain how economic activities of our life are organized and how to plan our economic decisions. Therefore, you have come to the university education system to be trained to think well.

It is common knowledge that we cannot think without language. The relationship between language and mind is a complex one. However, for our purposes it is enough to remember that language is a medium of thought. If you want to study the solar system, you need to study Physics, and Physics books explain to you about the solar system through the medium of a particular language. So, all subjects are written in languages. In other words, the knowledge of this world is available to us through languages. If you want to know about this world rationally, you need to know languages. If you, for example, don't know English you cannot access Newton's laws, Einstein's theory of relativity or Adam Smith's *The Wealth of*

Nations or Karl Marx's writings, because in today's world most of these writings are available in English. Therefore, knowing the English language is very important for knowing Physics, Economics, Sociology, etc. Now, we shall see how to master the English language or, for that matter, any language.

Before we proceed, let us summarize: during the college education, we study subjects like Physics, Mathematics, Sociology, Economics, Political Science, and Literature among others. To study them at the university level, we definitely need a fairly good knowledge of the English language. We need the language not only for day-to-day communication, but also for academic purposes.

In order to master the language, we need to know certain things and learn certain things. Remember, it is 'knowing' and 'learning'. Then, what are the knowable and what are the learnable?

### **Knowable: What do you need to know about language?**

Language is a human phenomenon. Any human activity is learnable and language is no exception. Learning involves mastering certain skills. Broadly speaking, there are four language skills—Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW). In the context of language learning process, these skills can be divided into two types; receptive skills and productive skills. The receptive skills are listening (meaningful sounds go into our ears) and reading (the meaning of what is printed on a page is decoded by the mind). Thus, we receive sounds and meanings. Further, we not only receive meanings and sounds but we also produce them. When we speak, we produce meaningful sounds and utterances, and when we write down something, we produce meanings on the page. Hence, speaking and writing are called productive skills. There is a close connection between the receptive and productive skills. To produce something we need to receive it first. Therefore, we have to master the receptive skills in order to master the productive skills. If we listen more we will be able to speak well, and to write well we need to read more.

It is interesting to know how we learn languages. Let us consider, for example, how we learn our first language/mother tongue. A child naturally picks up the language by listening to the people around her and then starts speaking. Children master listening and speaking skills before they go to school. In other words, the child is first of all exposed to listening and speaking skills, and only later reading and writing skills are taught informal

situations like schools and colleges. Thus, we may conclude that listening and speaking skills are social skills as they are acquired mainly from the social milieu, while reading and writing skills are educational skills as they are mainly learnt in an educational milieu. In other words, listening and speaking skills are mostly used for social purposes, and reading and writing skills are used for intellectual purposes.

There is an intrinsic connection between Higher Education and language learning. No discipline (subjects like Sociology, Chemistry, History, etc.) can be taught and learnt without language. To grasp Sociology, Political Science, Physics or Chemistry, we need language. At present, as the fund of knowledge in these disciplines is available mainly in the English language, mastering it will be very useful. If we know English well, we will also know these disciplines well. Hence, English should be taught to all students.

Then, what skills of the English language you need to pay attention to? Since the aim of higher education is to produce knowledge-makers (Sociologists, Social Scientists, Economists, Physicists, Chemical Scientists, Literary Scholars, etc.), we have to teach those language skills which help them to produce knowledge. To produce knowledge, we mainly require competence in reading and writing. For example, a BA student with Economics as an optional subject should have the competence to read and understand the classics in the subject of Economics. Likewise, the student of Sociology, Physics or Chemistry should have the competence to read and digest the classics in their respective subjects. Remember, it is relevant even in the context of the examinations you take. If you write well, you will get good marks in your exams. If you want to write well, you have to read more. Therefore, reading and writing skills should be prioritized in higher education. However, this does not mean that listening and speaking skills are not important. They are, but you have to practice them on your own. We can sensitize you to these skills in the classroom, but, ultimately, you should develop these skills by listening to online lectures, TV news, videos, and practicing speaking every day.

However, you are not simply learning the English language here. We would like to impart aesthetic education too. Therefore, you will be reading literary pieces such as poems, plays and short stories. The idea is to inculcate literary sensibility in you. As you read literary texts in this course, we will train you in the appreciation of literary language; we will teach you how to read literature.

**Learnable: How do you learn language?**

Nothing can be learnt easily. We can only learn through hard work and continuous practice. Language learning is a difficult task. We cannot learn a language in a single day. It takes years, and we will be able to acquire a language only through constant practice. Therefore, what you have to do if you want to learn English is to read every day whatever you like, either the newspaper or your respective subjects. While reading, you may come across difficult words. You need not stop reading immediately and look up their meanings in a dictionary. First, try to guess the meanings in the context of what you are reading. You may be wrong. But it does not matter. However, after you finish reading the text in hand, you can go back to the unfamiliar words and find out their meanings from a standard dictionary. Take care to find the appropriate meaning of each word that would fit into the context of what you were reading. This labor will definitely help you enrich your vocabulary. If you know the meaning of words, you almost know the language.

You need not worry too much about grammar at this stage. While reading you will internalize the grammar, the rules of a language, and later in classes we will teach you some aspects of grammar. When you learn new words, you need to learn to make use of those words. If you don't use the newly learnt words, then you don't learn language. However, you don't always speak with others in English in your everyday interactions. Therefore, you need to write something every day. When you write, you use new words, and slowly you get to master the language. You will learn correct grammatical forms along the way by observing while reading, and learn to write grammatically correct sentences. What is important is that if you want to master English, you must read and write something every day. If you don't, you cannot learn English.

What holds good for learning in general also holds good for learning languages. That is, if we don't have the desire to learn and do not like what we are learning, we cannot learn anything. If you don't develop the love for learning, you don't learn anything. Therefore, what is required is that you should primarily have the desire and passion for learning English. That will urge you to constantly search for different ways of learning English. You will soon find yourselves mastering it.

The problem with our attitude to learning English is that we want English just for the sake of passing examinations. If you want to learn English only for passing exams, you

cannot learn English. We do not study Economics, Political Science, Physics or Chemistry just for the sake of examinations. In fact, examinations exist for the sake of these subjects; exams are there to test our knowledge of the subject you have studied. Therefore, try to learn language not for the sake of examinations, but for the love of learning a language. Those things that we do just out of our love for doing them are really the ‘higher’ things. In this sense, your BA/B.Com/BBA/B.Sc are part of higher education. They are pursued for their own sake, for the love of doing them.

Let us assume that you have the desire and passion for learning English. But that is not enough. You need to practice what you learn. You should not think that what is taught in the General English class is enough. Apart from your classes and what your English teachers teach, you need to do a lot of extra reading and writing. For example, you can develop the habit of reading newspapers. While reading news papers, keep in mind that you are reading it not for the sake of information, but in order to learn the language. Therefore, while reading, you should observe how language is used in the newspaper—how sentences are formed, how words are used, how the article/news item is divided into paragraphs, etc. Sections from any English book on an interesting subject can be read. Similarly, using a standard dictionary should become a habit. And sometimes, as mentioned earlier, you should guess the meaning of difficult words. If you engage in such exercises every day, you will be able to master English soon.

Let us now discuss exercises in writing. First, practice copy writing and thus make your handwriting neat and, more importantly, legible. The aim of copy writing is to write well so that others can easily identify the letters and words you have written. Practice paragraph writing every day. Then, start constructing your own sentences. If there are mistakes, don’t bother about it. Go on writing every day. Take the help of your teachers, friends or siblings, whoever comes to your help, to correct your mistakes.

Of course, there are difficulties involved in these exercises. You may find it boring or difficult, and you may stop doing it. But remember, all things we want to learn and master pose such difficulties. We need to challenge ourselves and go ahead. Unless we have a strong passion for and commitment to learning a language, we will not be able to master it. If you stop in the middle, you will be the loser.

Just take pleasure in reading and writing, and English will be yours to command.