

PERCEPTIONS ON ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS AMONG ENGINEERING FIRST YEAR STUDENTS IN THE ESL CONTEXT-A RESEARCH

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Abstract: Engineering and Technology have over crossed borders and became the crucial ingredients for global integrity and development. Imparting academic writing for engineering students has become an essential need of the hour in order to exchange scientific and technological communication through formal and effective academic writing. The requirement for better communication skills is recognized as an emerging need applicable to all graduate engineers. 'Professional Communication in English' is offered as one of the prescribed core subjects in the first year engineering curriculum and substantial command in this subject is indispensable for students. This study examines the perceptions of engineering first year students pursuing computer science branch from one of the National Institutes of Technologies (NIT) in India. These questions how do the first year engineering students find writing skills useful to excel in academics? What are the students' perceptions on academic writing skills? In light of these issues, the researcher attempts to investigate these observations which relate to foster academic writing skills among engineering first year students on empirical research study. The data was collected using a survey questionnaire based on assessment of 5-point Likert scale. There is also a relationship between writing and reading indicates a need for fostering proficiency that would emphasize and enhance effective language skills in writing.

Keywords: Engineering students, writing skill, reading skill, feedback, evaluation, suggestions.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a precise skill which facilitates thoughts into words in the meaningful pattern and to psychologically interrelate with the message. A more recent teaching trend considers writing as a process and encourages students to engage in it understanding the conventions involved in written communication (Oster, 1987; White & Arndt, 1991; Carson & Leki, 1993). One learns writing skills in school and college as an essential component in curriculum. The division to use writing as tool is a deliberate choice because there has been sufficient argument that teachers of writing can find a valuable resource to improve the learners writing skill. (L.A.Hill (1982); Malinda.Y. Small, Suzanne B. Lovett and Martha S. Scher; (1993). According to Shaughnessy, M.P. (1977), "Writing is a process whereby an initial idea gets extended and refined." Writing implies the successful transmission of ideas from an addresser to an addressee via a text, and this exchange of information becomes a powerful means to motivate and encourage the development of language skills.

Judith Oster (1987) pointed out that the student encouraged to take part in such creative process will feel he is working on something worthwhile, and consequently

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will be more willing to correct and rewrite his composition. "What we are calling writing, must also be a thinking process, an organized, intelligent activity, not just a way of covering a page; ... both teacher and student will be working together through the process of thinking and rethinking, writing and rewriting" a particular text in order to make it readable. One must be able to write accurately and lucidly. So they must be aware of English language. The recruiter receives thousands of applications and has barely enough time to read each individual application. If one needs to be noticed, one must write content, which is impressive and unique. There should be no grammatical or spelling errors. The content should be concise and lucid. Scientific and technological accomplishments cannot be communicated verbally. They have to be presented in a written form such as scientific journals and white papers. The scientific concepts should be communicated in effective and sophisticated language. Poor written communication skills can diminish the scientific reputation of the individual.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gardner and Lambert (1972) emphasized the importance of attitude in language learning. According to them the institution of "family" plays a crucial role either in enhancing a positive or negative attitude towards other communities. The learners develop positive attitude with other communities if the family supports the community. They have also suggested that a learner's orientation towards the other community develops with the family. This kind of orientation in turn helps the learner to learn the language successfully, i.e. the success in language depends on the "learners' attitude" towards the target language.

Harris (1993) emphasized, "Writing is a process that occurs over a period of time, particularly if the writer takes account the sometimes extended periods of thinking that precede initial draft. In writing, the writer needs a time to do some processes inside. The length of the time is different among writers. Studies have indicated that a possible reason for students' low writing skills could be that many students have little opportunity to write. Much of the writing students are asked to do in school is in short-answer form, such as fill-in-the blank or short answer worksheets and tests".

William Zinsser (1988) asserted, "In Writing to Learn" that "Writing is thinking on paper. Anyone who thinks clearly should be able to write clearly about any subject at all" (p. 11). He highlighted that the teaching of writing should be the part of every academic discipline, not just the English department. According to Zinsser, "Writing across the curriculum wasn't just a method of getting students to learn who were afraid of writing. It was also a method of getting students to learn who were afraid of learning".

According to Sharma (1989), "the retention capacity of the learner depends on his need and curiosity to achieve his goal successfully, while attempting the task i.e.

the learners do the task perfectly if they are motivated". This kind of activity not only enhances the ability to learn but also help them to improve the ability of writing.

In the context of Asia, most students have not been exposed to academic discourse in their formal writing courses during secondary school education, and are often introduced to academic writing at university. As a part of the whole new cultural experience of university, students need to learn a new academic discourse because writing at university is very different to the style of writing which is taught at school (Davies 1994, Mullins et. al., 1995)

BACKGROUND

In recent times, the un-employability of Indian engineering professionals in the global scenario has been brought out reports in the media. Madan Padaki, Founder and CEO of Merit Trac pointed out, "A lot of our curriculum has been designed for rote learning, and hence, there is no scope for thinking." Former President of India, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam in the gathering of vice-chancellors during the 82nd annual meeting of the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) said "only twenty five per cent of graduating students were employable, and that students were lacking in areas such as technical knowledge, English proficiency and critical thinking".

Writing is one of the basic skills which enable everyone to be perfect in academic and business life. Unfortunately, this area is not given due importance. Writing skills are essential for achieving career, business goals and employability. It is an important medium of communication. If one wants to achieve his goals, superior writing skills are imperative. Ineffective and in conveyable written communication is definitely a stumbling block for their career and placement opportunities.

There are numerous methods as well as techniques deployed to enhance and hone one's writing skills. A little effort will go a long way to achieve goals. One such method to improvise effective writing skills is to better reading ability which is an imminent for any prospective candidate to fulfill expected requirements of the employers. The effective reading skills enable the upcoming young professionals to enhance optimum number of opportunities to develop writing skills.

Engineering students as future organizational managers need fulfilling the written communication requirements such as to write emails, reports, minutes, circulars, notices and other organizational communication and effective documentation, memos and letters which their subordinates are supposed to read, understand and reciprocate in smoother manner without any miscommunication and misunderstanding. It is quite sure that ineffective written communication not only makes adverse impressions on the professionals but also lead to misinterpretations besides wasting the time of employees. Therefore, the effective writing skills are beneficial to the managers in saving time and expenditure as they capture organization in prosperity.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Even though the large numbers of students are good at speaking, their writing proficiency level showed not up to the mark. In Emig, J's view actual "process of writing does not proceed in linear sequence, rather they are recursive (1981): Murray (1978) commented that it is a process of discovery and the most appropriate definition of writing is that "it is a process of using language to discover meaning in experience and to communicate it". This is identified much in the student groups due to their lack of adequate practice, deficient confidence level in writing, experiencing writing as a more difficult skill than other skills, not much aware of getting placements and career through writing as a major skills, lack of participating in competitions regularly in writing events instructional strategies are need to study for investigating the poor skill performance in writing skill among the students. The overall aim of this research was to contribute to developing better writing skills for engineering students learning to read and write in early years. The writing skills of engineering students need improvement.

DEVELOPING WRITING SKILL THROUGH READING SKILL

Writing is an interactive process by nature since it evolves out of the symbolic interplay between writer text and reader. By making conditions more authentic than the one's in traditional classroom tasks, an awareness of audience, purpose is to be reinforced, while planning a written piece; the writer is constrained to consider the audience and to adopt a reader oriented approach so as to achieve a persuasive, emotive or objective function. Interactivity can be promoted in the writing class by implementing some of the suggestions given below (adapted from L. Hamp-Lyons and B. Heasley 1992).

Writing skills are inter-related with reading skills also. Language learning depends upon four primary skills. One should be trained in a way that he is able to communicate fluently in that language. Everyone is born with one language and it is well thought-out as first language or the mother tongue of that person. Environment is a crucial part in developing any language in which person lives. Listening and reading are helpful to develop learner's critical faculties to comprehend the language properly.

Peacock (1986) Described, "writing as a struggle to compose ideas in the head and to construct a visible and tangible form out of the models and images that are stored and organized in the mind". He said written work has ambiguities. This caused lack of clarity and ambiguities arise when text is composed in the absence of the reader that is the ideas of the writer may not always be concomitant with those of the reader. Peacock emphasizes coherence and clarity in the written work so that the reader will not be confused when he reads a particular text.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

This research has specific goals:

1. A primary goal is to enhance academic writing skills among engineering students by assessing their writing skills. The major objective of this goal is to study significant gains in the students' writing skills by providing certain time factor for reading activity. To investigate the consequent results whether the students will be able to present writing assignments in well-structured, focused, organized and detailed as per written procedural norms by providing ample opportunities of reading prescribed course material and other various designed modules to certain time bound.
2. Another goal of this study is to consider the various perceptions on academic writing skills of the students studying engineering and to make the students adequate use of resources and develop practical application of knowledge in reading. To suggest the students regard various methods and approaches regarding better writing skills, the need and requirements of developing them in academic and corporate world.

Bamberg (1984), Suggested that the difficulties of coherence can be overcome by teaching students, the strategies of coherence, such as the use of connective devices like pronouns, repetitive structures, transitional markers etc., at a paragraph level. The above studies view writing as a "conscious" mental efforts reflective activity a thinking process and Widdowson, H.G (2001) "authentic tasks used for developing writing skills can lead to better learning of writing". He is of the opinion that oral information gap activities promote learning, as a language cannot be learnt in isolation. However, integrating writing with other skills of listening, reading and speaking promotes second language learning.

Hutchinson and Kleplac (1982) said "as gives of information the writers take little or no account of the needs or background knowledge of the audience, as receives they hear but do not listen, consequently the amount of communication is minimal". It indicates that the task needs to be related to the lives of the students to be able to take part in it. At the same time there should be some match between their social roles, perceptions and expectations in a given task so that they do not have to perform in an uninteresting situation. The above discussion delineates writing as a process, which is a result of continued research done in writing skills in last few decades. In the following section developments in the research in writing has been discussed for the purpose of understanding the theory of writing.

METHODOLOGY

Here, in this research the researcher has chosen Likert scale. A Likert Scale is a psychometric scale commonly used in questionnaires and is the most widely used scale in survey research. When responding to a Likert questionnaire item,

respondents specify their level of agreement to a statement. Consisting of ten items, the questionnaire was constructed in the form of a 5-Point Likert scale (where 1 indicates strongly disagree and 4 strongly agree): Item 1 relates to the question of whether the participants learn and practice writing activity regularly; Item 2 asked on need for more training and practice sessions to develop writing skills; Item 3 on reading activity helps to develop writing skills; Item 4 related to know whether participants have good command over appropriate vocabulary and word forms to effectively communicate with the reader; Item 5 explores whether teachers help to develop students' writing skills; Item 6 elicits whether reading activity enhances confidence level in writing. Item 7 brings out whether the writing skills help the students to be successful in placements and career opportunities. Item 8 is to find out if writing skills are more difficult than other skills such as reading, speaking and listening skills. Item 9 asked to find out the students can write accurately without any mistakes in grammar, spelling and punctuation. Item 10 analyzes whether the students do participate regularly in writing competitions (such as creative and literary events).

Effective academic writing skills as one of the essential components have been included at various levels in the engineering curriculum. Firstly, the participants were explained the gradations of 5 point Likert scale assessment on writing skills based on learners' experiences: the groundwork, the procedure etc. They were provided a mock practice session based on which they were prompted to assess their weak points. Individualized feedback was given to each of the participant.

This research study was based on the experiment conducted among fifty (50) students pursuing engineering first year from the computer science engineering branch. To assess the students' needs taking into account the specific purposes for which students will use the written communication skills, the kind of language required in their field, career and employment oriented skills adequate in writing. The scope of research provides the researcher to go further to suggest fostering writing skills through reading as an activity surely enhances students' competence.

Research Tools

- (a) Researcher's observation
- (b) Questionnaires

The questionnaire consists of ten questions which are based on Likert type scale. The questionnaire is constructed in a systematic manner. The process involves a number of interrelated steps. The steps used in constructing a questionnaire.

- Ranging from strongly disagree to disagree
- Ranging from agree to strongly agree
- The third rating is undecided where there is no compulsion on the respondent and the compulsion is avoided on the respondent in giving the specific response. The responses are revealed in frankness by choosing the choices.

Reporting on Likert Scale

The traditional way to report on a Likert scale is to sum the values of each selected option and create a score for each respondent. This score is then used to represent a particular trait. The scores can be used to create a chart of the distribution of opinion across the population.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The questionnaire was constructed and administered to fifty (50) engineering students from first year computer science engineering branch from one of the reputed National Institute of Technologies, India as part of the research investigation. The researcher has taken steps to collect the stratified samples from the participants. The participants' information related to data collection had been kept confidential as per the norms of the institution. The test questionnaire comprises of ten (10) questions. **(The researcher has enclosed the questionnaire in the annexure-I).**

The data analysis infers that 44% of the students did not agree that they learn and practice writing activity regularly (Graph 1). Related to the need for more practice and training to develop students writing skills, it reveals that 52% of the students agreed the same (Graph 2). It is quite evident that 50% of the respondents agreed that their reading skills enable to develop their writing skills (Graph 3). In terms of the students' having good command over appropriate vocabulary and word forms to effectively communicate with the reader 38% of the students did not decide this (Graph 4). 72% of the students agreed that their teachers help them in developing their writing skills (Graph 5). The analysis infers 48% of students strongly disagreed that their reading activity enhances their confidence level in writing (Graph 6). 32% of the participants strongly disagreed that their writing skills help them to be successful in placements and career opportunities (Graph 7). From the analysis of the data 46% of the students their experience writing skills are more difficult than other skills such as reading, speaking, listening skills disagreed the same (Graph 8). Related to students' experience writing skills are more difficult than other skills such as reading, speaking, listening skills, the students 46% of them strongly agreed the same (Graph 9). 40% of the students disagreed and 6% strongly disagreed that they do participate in writing competitions regularly (Creative and literary events agreed the same (Graph 10). **(The researcher has enclosed the findings and interpretation of the data in the annexure-II).**

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This exploratory research discloses the fact that knowing how writing skills could be enhancing professional communication skills among the engineering students

and further the research can be extended to professional graduates pursuing, management, aviation, pharmaceutical and also from prestigious higher halls of learning similar to IITs and NITs to explore the facts whether the effective documentation and report writing skills acquisition and practice in their English Language Labs (ELL) help them to be successful in obtaining substantial campus placement and career and to be enable them in obtaining better employment opportunities in today's competitive era.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the frequency analysis drawn from the respondents' feedback some suggestions are mentioned to strengthen Engineering students writing skills as:

Assign Reading Activity

The activity is assigned primarily on reading exercises, in which students involve themselves to "comprehend essential elements" of a particular topic. If students aren't sure about how to approach the activity, have them the help of the teachers in doing better way.

Encourage Students in Developing Reading with Quick Understanding

In order to encourage students' effective writing abilities, it is suggested to develop the quality of reading among them. Largely the students depend on reading the text books. Besides, they need to be encouraged reading references. Regular constant practice also required for them to gain command with perfection on effective writing and presentation techniques through developing intensive reading practice which will help them in building confidence.

1. It is required to provide ample time for students to practice more writing activities based on reading selected topics of their choice.
2. It is required to train up the students in effective writing in documentation and presentation topic sore to develop their vocabulary, conversational and listening skills and also to develop their ideas effectively.
3. The more practice required for developing writing skills to reduce the students' fear and inferiority in effective writing and to develop documentation skills.
4. The faculty members should focus on helping more the students to develop oral communication-extempore skills.
5. Appropriate vocabulary, word forms need to be practiced to strengthen students' writing skills in the language labs.
6. Developing practice on writing skills to get command over effective documentation writing skills.

CONCLUSION

The overall perceptions of the students are evident that the effective writing skills play a significant role in enhancing professional communication skills. Adequate practice sessions in developing academic writing skills imminently required not only to build confidence but also to be successful in campus placement drives. The more practice required for students to gain command over appropriate vocabulary and word reading activities enhance their confidence in effective writing activity.

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ANNEXURE

Annexure-I: Perceptions on Academic Writing Skills Among Engineering First Year Students in the ESL Context-A Research Questionnaire

Dear Participant,

Please rate your abilities for each item below on a scale from 1 to 5.

Circle your choice.

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree

1	I learn and practice writing activity regularly.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I need more practice and training to develop my writing skills.	1	2	3	4	5
3	My reading skills enable to develop my writing skills.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I have good command over appropriate vocabulary and word forms to effectively communicate with the reader.	1	2	3	4	5
5	My teachers help me in developing my writing skills.	1	2	3	4	5
6	Reading activity enhances my confidence level in writing.	1	2	3	4	5
7	My writing skills help me to be successful in placements and career opportunities.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I experience writing skills are more difficult than other skills such as reading, speaking, listening skills.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I can write accurately without any mistakes in grammar, spelling and punctuation.	1	2	3	4	5
10	I do participate in writing competitions regularly (creative and literary events).	1	2	3	4	5

Signature of the student

Annexure-II: Frequency analysis of the data has been presented.

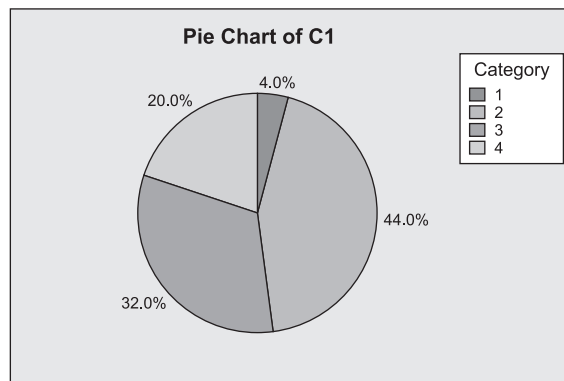


Figure 1: I learn and practice writing activity regularly

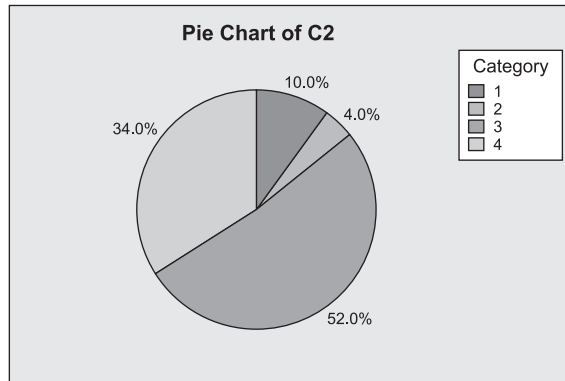


Figure 2: I need more practice and training to develop my writing skills

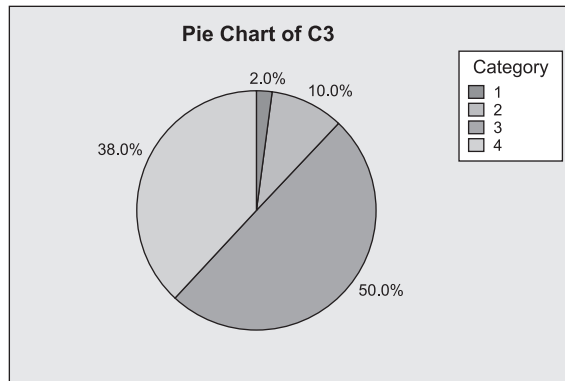


Figure 3: My reading skills enable to develop my writing skills

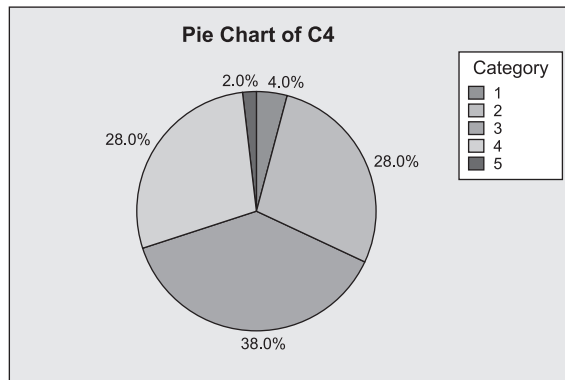


Figure 4: I have good command over appropriate vocabulary and word forms to effectively communicate with the reader

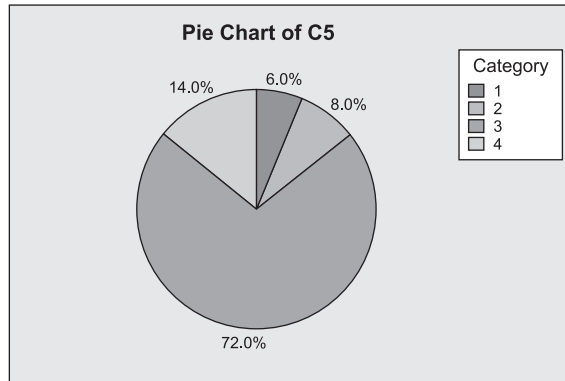


Figure 5: My teachers help me in developing my writing skills

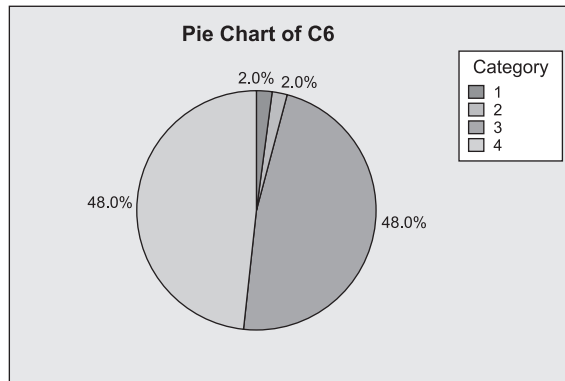


Figure 6: Reading activity enhances my confidence level in writing

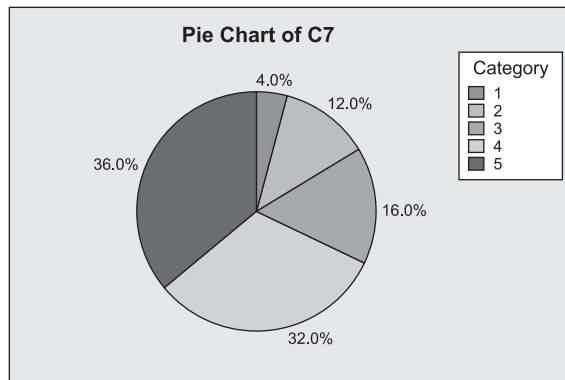


Figure 7: My writing skills help me to be successful in placements and career opportunities

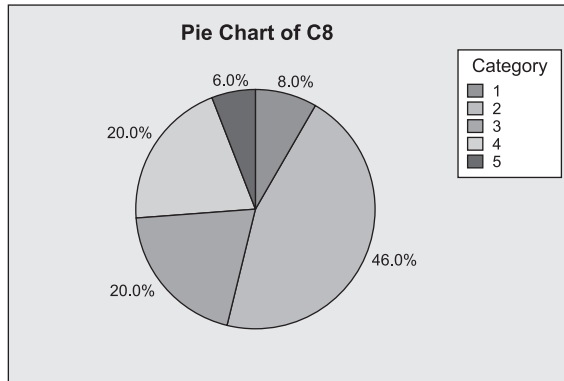


Figure 8: I experience writing skills are more difficult than other skills such as reading, speaking, listening skills

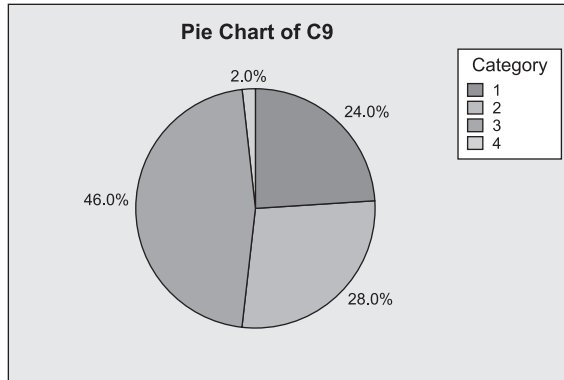


Figure 9: I experience writing skills are more difficult than other skills such as reading, speaking, listening skills

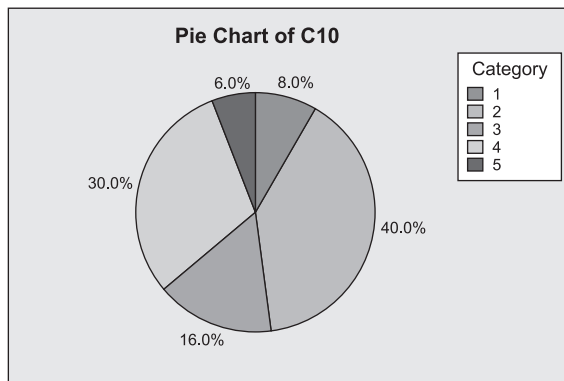


Figure 10: I do participate in writing competitions regularly (creative and literary events)