

# An Integrative Approach to the Teaching of Technical Communication Skills

Roland Yeo, *Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore*

## SUMMARY

This paper examines the role of language in the teaching of technical report writing for first-year Engineering students at Temasek Polytechnic. It describes, predicts and critiques the communicative behaviours of these students when they came into contact with report writing. Using an exploratory approach with an interactional sociolinguistics analysis, my intention is to generate insights that are of practical and meaningful use in tertiary education. Triangulation of data, drawn primarily from classroom teaching and tutor consultation, was realized through informal interviews, questionnaires, drafts as well as final reports. Findings indicate that good report writing can be learnt through an integrative approach in the teaching of proper framework and techniques. Results were encouraging: students not only demonstrated a high level of creativity and enthusiasm in class activities, but also a considerable improvement in their final reports. Most importantly, there has been a noticeable shift in their attitude towards writing.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

At Temasek Polytechnic, Engineering students are introduced to Technical Communication Skills (TCS) as a core subject in their first-year curriculum. They are taught modules like Listening, Note-taking, Reading and Oral Presentation skills, and Fundamentals of Writing which includes Report Writing. When I first started teaching TCS at the Polytechnic in 1997, I found that students learnt these skills for the sake of fulfilling the requirements for the subject. Most of them failed to take the skills to another level by either integrating them into their learning of other technical subjects or putting them into practical use in their daily life. Also, each module in TCS was treated as a separate entity. Students simply did not realize how these communication skills could enhance their learning processes.

In 1998, I observed that during the Technical Report Writing lesson, the final module in the TCS syllabus, students were unsure of how to write a proper report even though they were aware of the general content. Each group of about four or five students had to write

a technical report based on a Power Supply project that was done in one of their technical subjects. I first taught them the basic structure of a technical report and I discovered that most of them were attempting very hard to fit the main ideas into each section without considering the overall development of the report. They were unsure how to further develop the content into other parts of the report.

### Rationale for the research

This problem was seen as an opportunity for me to integrate previous skills taught in TCS into the writing module. Note-taking techniques were revisited and integrated into report writing. It was aimed at allowing the students to discover the relevance of practical skills such as note taking in an academic context. It was also my intention to carry out a more integrative approach in my teaching rather than teaching in separate blocks. Hence, I used the writing module as a platform to explore the communicative behaviour of students.