CHAPTER V

THE EXPERIMENTAL COURSE

5.0 INTRODUCTION

The chapter has three sections. The first section gives an account of the context in which the experimental course was designed and implemented, the second gives the objectives and the methodology of the study adopted, and the third analyses the classroom interaction on each unit of the materials prepared.

5.1 CONTENT OF COURSE DESIGN

The Course in Writing was field-tested in the Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru College of Agriculture, Karaikal, affiliated to the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore. The students were in the First Year B.Sc. (Agriculture) class and were twenty-four in number, consisting of boys and girls. They had compulsory English for only one trimester from November to February. The trial reported in this study lasted from November 1990 to February 1991.

The students had two hours of prose a week, the text prescribed being Understanding Technical English by Sudarsanam (1988) and a three-hour session for Composition,
called Practical Class every week. No separate course book on writing was prescribed. There were altogether 20 hours for prose and 10 three-hour sessions for composition during the trimester.

The prescribed syllabus (Appendix - A) broadly states that language skills have to be imparted to the students, but does not mention specifically the writing skills to be developed. Further, the English teacher is the course teacher who sets the class tests as well as the final examination and evaluates, i.e., there is 100% internal assessment without any external examiner. This gives wide scope to the course teacher to devise his own supplementary materials for teaching composition and adopt suitable classroom strategies and appropriate evaluation procedures.

The study draws on the belief that, given teacher autonomy, as it was in the present case, the course teacher can design a course based on current theories of learning with suitable materials, keeping in view the syllabus requirement and the needs of the students.

The writing course was made a part of the overall teaching of English. Supplementary materials were used on the course and the classroom approach and teaching methodology adopted differed from the usual teacher-centred approach involving the use of sentence-level exercises and the preparation of students only for a final examination.
The researcher used the two hours of prose class per week to deal with the prose lessons trying to help the students understand the texts. The writing course was, however, fully used to lead the students through the various stages in the process of writing discussed in Chapter III.

There were 49 students in the first year and for prose classes they sat together. The class was, however, divided into two - Section A with 24 students and Section B with 25 students. The course in writing designed by the researcher was tried out with Section A.

5.2 OBJECTIVES AND CLASSROOM METHODOLOGY

The objectives of the present study were:

1) to design a Writing Course with topics relevant to the students' academic and professional needs,
2) to try out a process-oriented classroom approach to the teaching of writing,
3) to establish the role of the teacher in the classroom as that of a facilitator rather than of a dictator, and
4) to make the teaching of writing task-based with a view to developing in the students the writing skills.
The study is based on the research findings discussed in the previous chapters that 1) writing is a means of exploring meaning, 2) the syllabus should be learner-centred rather than fulfil only the examination needs, and 3) with appropriate classroom strategies, the teaching of writing can be made more purposeful and meaningful to the students.

Since the course was meant to respond to the language needs of the learners, their needs were studied before designing the course through personal interviews (informal talk) with the staff of the college and an analysis of the previous years' class test question papers set by the earlier course teachers and the prescribed text-book.

5.2.2 In teaching the various units, the students were guided through the different stages of writing as explained in the previous chapter. Before the students could begin to write, the task was thoroughly discussed with the whole class. The students were encouraged to ask questions, raise doubts, and seek clarifications freely on any point pertaining to the task.

All efforts were taken to see that the students did not feel inhibited to speak for fear of producing ungrammatical sentences. When grammatically unacceptable utterances were made, the researcher modified them by
rephrasing them without in any way disparaging the student's effort. The pre-writing discussion had an advantage in that corrections, if necessary, could be carried out at the oral stage itself without being carried over to the written text. Therefore, once the students began to write, they were not sitting starry-eyed for want of ideas or expressions.

Depending on the nature of the tasks, the students were sometimes instructed to discuss the topics in groups. During these sessions, the researcher went round helping the students and directing the course of the discussion. Special attention was paid to the weak and the meek. Generally, English was used in all the interactions, and Tamil was used occasionally by the rural-based Tamil medium students whenever they felt the need.

The students were encouraged to write one or two rough drafts concentrating only on the organization of the content and not to feel constrained by grammar. Help was provided during their writing through the researcher's positive intervention at the point at which difficulties arose. In this way, the students were given genuine support when it was most needed and could have the maximum beneficial effect.

Once the students were ready with their first drafts, they were instructed to circulate them among the members of
their group for comments. They were given guidelines to evaluate them with reference to cohesion, coherence, main and supporting details, and overall organization of content, etc.. The purpose of both peer and teacher evaluation was not to give grades/scores, but to provide a useful feedback to the students for improving their writing.

During all these activities, the teacher's job was perceived mainly as creating conditions in the classroom that would enable the students to learn by being engaged in activities or working on tasks, that is, his role was only to "set up conditions and activities that would make it possible for students to operate with language" (Murdock 1990:15).

Since there was a need to make students realize that successive drafts and painstaking attempts at rewriting them would bear fruit, every step was taken to make them realize that they would be successful, if they were diligent, and that effective writing was not a matter of luck but the result of sustained effort. This was necessary as many students have

the belief, sometimes well-grounded in their previous experience, that writing teachers are capricious individuals, and that, therefore,
success in the writing class will have little to do with ability or effort. This belief hinders their writing effort (McLeod 1987:430).

As there was also the need to wean the students away from the traditional, product-oriented approach, the researcher subtly impressed upon them the need to proceed along the various stages of writing with interest.

Although successful writers are typically unconscious of their writing processes (thereby freeing their consciousness to concentrate on content), writers who wish to improve should make themselves temporarily conscious of their writing processes (Coe and Gutierrez 1981:264).

The process approach also requires "teachers to assume a less controlling role, to give up the notion that they 'own' knowledge" (Zamel 1987:701). This encouraging role instead of a domineering one would help to create a supportive atmosphere for the students to work in. In this way, the teacher would give them the freedom to write with ease as well as the discipline that is necessary to blossom into good writers.

Keeping the overall design of the course in view, suitable supplementary materials were selected and used with the students. These materials were generally
encountered by the students in their actual life and academic context—newspapers, magazines, text-books, and seminars. They were from various sources and were thus varied in nature. In addition to long texts, there were short news write-ups and diagrams, ranging from text-book materials to conference papers.

The students taking the writing course had just stepped into the portals of the college from the high school and were new even to the main subject of their study, agriculture. Hence, the materials were not very technical in nature, though they had a bearing on science, particularly agriculture. They were, however, such that they could be related to the students' personal interests and academic experience. They would serve their short-term goals, i.e., the need to write laboratory reports for their practical classes, general assignments, tests, etc. as well as the long-term goals of doing research, writing seminar papers, etc..

Since the aim of the course was to impart the writing skills and to teach the students to write reports, essays, and memoranda, and to interpret diagrams, charts, and tables, the materials were selected in a way that they could lend themselves to such tasks. They were also designed to provide for problem-solving activities, giving
scope for divergent views in the analysis of the given data during discussions.

These functionally conceived materials were intended to make the writing course enriching for the students and to enable the teacher to plan meaningful classroom activities and move towards designing self-instructional, task-based materials. According to a study made by Singh (1992:39), an overwhelming 86% of the students of professional colleges interviewed supported self-access learning materials. This suggests that the students would like to take a personal route for learning English to take care of their individual needs.

Data were provided for all the tasks so that the students could concentrate on other features of writing like organization and effective presentation of the content. Since writing primarily involves selection and organization of information, the students must think about those they would need to select for the purpose and present them in a coherent fashion. Bruner (in Mohanraj 1980) has established through his research that the cognitive skills that a person already possessed would help him to think inductively. This shows that by exposing the students to familiar data, which they need to manipulate and reproduce in a different manner, students can be made to write as
well as to think. Hence, in the present study the students were given data for all the tasks they had to attempt.

Even the teaching of common grammatical structures was task- and text-based. For example, active and passive constructions were differentiated through different kinds of texts. Grammar instruction was also individualized based on the errors of the students and was done during the rewriting stage when the researcher evaluated and reformulated the students' writings. Utterances were looked at not in isolation but with reference to the context in which they appeared. Grammar was therefore not treated in isolation but in the context of forming sentences to convey meaning in appropriate situations.

The teaching of vocabulary too was text- and task-based. The students were made to look at words in their contexts.

The way to understand the meaning of a word is to study it in the language game to which it belongs, to see how it contributes to the communal activity of a group of language users. In general, the meaning of a word is not in an object for which it stands, but rather its use as a language (Kenny 1973:14 in Nair 1991:78).
In evaluation, the focus was on fluency and content in the earlier drafts and on the mechanics of writing only in the later ones. Evaluation served as a feedback and helped to better one’s writing. Efforts were taken to impress upon the students that mere mechanical perfection would not make for effective presentation of the content. Errors in the students' writing were used to plan ahead, as suggested by Raimes (1983:22).

5.3 PILOT STUDIES

Before designing the experimental course reported in this thesis, the researcher had attempted many pilot studies during two years earlier at the tertiary level. Two of them are outlined below.

5.3.1 The first one involved a class of twenty students in a two-hour session. The objectives were: a) to devise an effective pre-writing activity to facilitate writing, b) to get students involved and interested in the material presented, c) to develop in them the ability to analyse the material from various points of view, d) to enable them to communicate orally what they have understood before writing, and e) to make them think creatively to find a suitable topic to write on.

The materials chosen were: a) a news item that had appeared in an English newspaper a month before, b) an
editorial written on the incident reported in the news item, and c) a few letters to the editor that had followed the news item and the editorial.

The news item was about a fire mishap that had occurred in a match factory in Sivakasi in Tamil Nadu. It was a ghastly scene in which were found the charred bodies of some children, who must have been employed against the labour laws.

Some students were given copies of the news item, a few others the editorial, and the rest the four different letters addressed to the editor. They were instructed to read through the texts given to them, exchange comments on them or seek explanations or clarifications. They were encouraged to guess the meanings of unfamiliar words from the context, although the researcher had to give the meaning of some of those words himself.

One student presented his summary of the news item to the class and the students with the same materials filled the gaps in his summary. The others with the editorial and the letters were attentive to the summary because what they themselves had been given and had read would now be understood better or in a new light. The editorial and the letters being comments on the incident, the editor and the letter-writers had only alluded to certain parts in the news item.
Next, when the students with the other materials presented individually a summary of what they had read, it was a kind of an information-gap filling exercise. "In order to promote real communication between students, there must be an information gap between them. Without such a gap the classroom activities and exercises will be mechanical and artificial" (Richards et al. 1985:140, in Singh 1985). "Information is well received only when there is doubt" (Cherry 1857:168, in Singh 1985).

The materials given thus provided diverse points of view on the same accident in different genres - a news report, an editorial, and letters to the editor. The students' oral presentations were followed by a critical analysis of the incident, with the researcher directing the discussion through comprehension questions.

After the discussion, the students were asked to find a suitable topic to write on in an essay of about 200 words. Since essay-writing was a part of the syllabus, the experiment fulfilled a syllabus requirement too.

The researcher found that newspaper materials of such topical, local and emotional interest gave much scope for brainstorming and discussion among the students. Moreover, topics of this kind were also sometimes given in the examination. This experiment proved that, to create a
communicative situation in the classroom and to generate ideas for an essay, materials from newspapers could be used effectively with suitable classroom strategies.

5.3.2 In the second study, the researcher tried out a method for giving to a writing task an audience focus, purpose, and a touch of reality. It involved a short story, 'Half-A-Rupee Worth' by R.K.Narayan in the prose text prescribed. In the story, Subbiah, a rice merchant, loses business owing to the introduction of rationing and so he applies for a licence to open a fair price shop to sell government-distributed rice and other commodities.

Two tasks were constructed based on this situation in the story.

a) The students were instructed to write a letter as Subbiah would to the Director of Civil Supplies seeking a licence to open a fair price shop. They had to give strong reasons why he should be given a licence.

b) They had to imagine that Subbiah met an official in the Civil Supplies Department and pleaded his case for a licence. The students were asked to write out the dialogue between Subbiah and the official, in which the official must seek details
about the former's business and the latter had to press his case.

The advantages of the tasks were: a) The context or the situation in the story had a touch of reality, and the letter had a specific purpose and a specific audience, both of them very crucial to real-life writing. b) The students could get into the spirit of the tasks and be a little creative, as they could identify themselves with the characters in the story. c) The exercises enhanced the students' vocabulary relevant to the situation, and hence, facilitated their writing of a summary in the examination.

These experiments on certain aspects of writing served to help in the design of the process-oriented, need-based Writing Course. The students' active participation in the classroom discussion, their involvement in the writing of the tasks, and the better output could be explored in a bigger way in the design and effective implementation of the Writing Course.

5.4 MATERIALS

The following section gives an analysis of the materials used in the classroom on the experimental writing course and reports on the classroom interaction. Each session was of three hours' duration and there were altogether 10
sessions. The first session was meant for administering a pre-test.

5.4.1. The pre/post-test paper (Appendix - E) had four sections to be attempted by the students. The first one was on essay writing. The students had to write an essay, in not less than 150 words and not exceeding 400 words, on 'Eucalyptus trees'. A controversy was raging then in Tamil Nadu about the beneficial and harmful effects of eucalyptus trees on the ecosystem. The regional Tamil magazines too carried articles and news items on the issue. Hence, the title was topically relevant to the students at that time. The students were provided with the data collected from a few articles so that they could focus on the organization of ideas without spending much time on generating the content and other aspects. However, they had to sift through the data given, manipulating them to suit the focus of their essay. They were instructed to use only the data provided, since the focus was on training them to use the available data.

The second section was on report writing. The students had to write a report as from the Revenue Officer of Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu to the Minister for Agriculture on the flood situation in the district. There was a real-life purpose for the task - the Revenue Officer has to send reports on such calamities as a matter of
routine and as part of his duties and responsibilities, and to seek assistance for relief measures for the people. There was also a clear sense of the readership - the Minister for Agriculture, in this case, who would need such a report to take necessary action. Here too, as in the previous section, the students were given the data, which they had to use to prepare an effective report. The students were expected to give a form, present the calamitous situation in a convincing way, and seek suitable assistance for relief operations.

The third section was on the use of imperatives/passives, the most common sentence patterns in the laboratory reports. Instead of sentence-level exercises, a text was given providing a suitable context for the structures and the students were asked to use the imperative and the passive structures in a meaningful description of a process.

The fourth and last section was on note-making and writing an abstract. The students were expected to write down the main points/ideas of the text given and produce an abstract or a brief summary of it.

5.4.2 After the pre-test was administered, regular classes followed, for two three-hour sessions a week. A unit-wise analysis of the materials used and an account of the
classroom interaction are given below. The materials are given in Appendix - F.

**Unit 1:** It consisted of five sections. The first section with five passages was meant to make the students aware of the sentence patterns - passive, assertive, and imperative - by a process of induction. The students were made to learn the appropriate structures in contexts.

They were asked to go through four passages - A, B, C, and D - and find out the differences and similarities, i.e., they were asked to see what sentence structures were used and in which context or contexts a particular mode of writing or speaking would be appropriate.

Some came out with the explanation that, since the doers were many in Text B and since all of them were important, the active voice construction was best suited for this kind of describing a process. Text C was felt to be suitable when someone had to explain a process to someone else in a spoken context.

The students were asked to identify the verbs in Text A. It was found that the verbs could be grouped under two patterns - (a) is - ed and (b) are - ed. Even gets fused could be listed under Pattern (a). The students realized that, for the limited purpose of writing laboratory reports, the passive construction was more appropriate. The students were then instructed to rewrite
the imperatives in Text D into the passive form as in Text A, and vice versa.

These text-level exercises, instead of sentence-level ones, were aimed at giving the students exposure to the common sentence structures of imperatives, actives, and passives in meaningful contexts. The students generally have the notion that all the active sentences in the English language could be transformed by a mechanical process into passive sentences. Though active-passive transformation is possible, they are not freely interchangeable in all contexts. These text-based transformation exercises were given to bring home this aspect of the language to the students.

In Section II, sentences with blanks for verbs were given in a jumbled order. These sentences describe how leather puppets are made. The students were served with pictures (included in the Unit) describing the method in the right order. By studying them, they had to reorder the jumbled sentences and fill in the blanks with the correct forms of the verbs supplied.

Some of the students interchanged the two sentences,

- The skin is ironed out and The skin is dried.

Many students filled in sentence (e) with is dried because 'it' became stiff, like parchment. Though the exercise with pictures appeared simple, it set them thinking. The
Students were also encouraged to exchange views with their neighbours, which generated lively discussion.

The students of agriculture were required to have practical work experience in the fields. They had to observe farm activities or do some work themselves, and document their observations or work. Hence, in this exercise, they were asked to observe the process in action and write about it. The verbs were supplied. However, if the students were very advanced in English, the supply of verbs might be dispensed with. The ability to observe, understand, and document was considered necessary for the students.

It was actually found that the verbs had to be supplied even for the advanced level students in the class, because no one had any knowledge of how puppets were made and took some time to sequence the pictures. The verbs supplied to them, in fact, helped them in sequencing the steps. Difficulties experienced by them only paved the way for some healthy classroom interaction.

The third section was only a reinforcement of the earlier section on imperatives.

The fourth section gave a flow-chart on how rubber or latex was made. The students were asked to describe the process using passive verbs/imperatives. They were also
asked to use appropriate linking words. Since the students had to learn ultimately to write coherent and cohesive texts, the use of linkers was built into all the exercises.

White (1980) suggests a lesson plan to teach ‘process’ through flow diagrams. First, students can be given a description of a process which they have to summarise in the form of a flow diagram. A blank flow diagram with the requisite number of boxes to match the steps in the process can be given on a worksheet. The completed worksheet can then become a cue sheet for a written reconstruction of the process. Secondly, a completed flow diagram can be given to act as a cue sheet for the production of a written text.

He, however, cautions teachers to avoid contrastive presentation of active and passive forms, as this would confuse the students. In a short-term programme with the first year students of a professional course, it was felt that there was a need to practise all the forms together. Besides, the exercises were meant to be a reinforcement of what they already knew in the case of some students and, in the case of a few others, an introduction to the appropriate forms in context.

The fifth and last section was on writing a short paragraph using active/passive/imperative sentences, describing how milk was processed. The process was
described in single words like Purchase, Weighing, and Testing. The students were asked to read through the chart of words given and understand the process. They were then required to write a paragraph with appropriate linkers in any way they thought would be proper and effective.

The various verb patterns - active, passive and imperative - were thus introduced in different ways - through paragraphs, pictures, and flow-charts. Paragraphs could be given in flow-charts and vice versa. In case any student was good at drawing, he could attempt a sketch after reading the process from the paragraphs and flow charts.

Unit 2. This unit was on note-making. A passage on 'Insects' was given with notes on it as a model. The students were first asked to go through the passage, make notes on it, and then compare their notes with the ones given. They had to see if what they had written was different and how their notes could be modified if necessary. The model notes were not given to the learners to be copied or imitated, but were shown to them only after they had attempted making notes on their own, to benefit from them.
Two students came out with the following sketch:

: Useful - Ex. Bees, Silkworms

Insects -

: Harmful - Ex. Locusts, Mosquitoes

: Merely interesting - Ex. Butterflies, Ladybirds

Such a sketch/tree diagram format had already been taught to the students while doing the prose lesson 'Right shape for the game'. Students were instructed to make notes in any format, which would help them to recollect the points later and develop them into an essay.

In the passage on 'Hero', the students initially had some difficulty. Since it was about an event, they could list the actions in chronological order, one by one. The purpose was to make the students know that the format of notes would depend on the kind of text.

Model notes on two passages A and B - 'Acquiring Information' and 'Musical Instruments' - were given with blanks in them to be filled in by the students. Since the students had already attempted note-making, these exercises were meant to provide further practice, in case they had still any difficulty with this skill, or for improving their own understanding of the technique by being exposed to other ways of jotting down points.
The notes on 'Pyramids' and 'Malta' had every piece of information in full. They were given to the students to be improved upon. Still, a few students in the class took down notes in complete sentences, or phrases with complete verbs. The students were therefore instructed to go through Passages A and B and recapitulate how notes had been made on them. Such models were found useful by the bright students to improve on their performance and the weak students to learn from.

The notes taken by some of the students were analysed in the open class. For the second and the third paragraphs in the passage on 'Pyramids', the students came out with 'earliest pyramid' and 'the largest pyramid' as the two main points. It was pointed out in the discussion that, if they wrote down 'Step Pyramid' and 'Great Pyramid' as the main ideas, the subordinate ideas like 'sides go up in large steps' and 'the pyramid consists of more than two million blocks of stone' would fit the main ideas. Making notes thus involves not only storing facts to retrieve them later, but putting the relevant data/facts imaginatively in a compact form.

Unit 3. Summarising. This unit on summarising was built on the previous unit of note-making. Students would also see the purpose and meaning behind taking clear notes.
"Summaries stem from notes" (Tickoo and Sasikumar 1979:131).

Students were asked to give a summary of the passage on 'Malta' from the notes they had taken. Everyone of them put in the summary the points in the order in which they were found in the original text. One student, however, began her summary with a note on Malta's importance as a strategic area, which was found last in the text. To her, the passage on 'Malta' became relevant because of its strategic importance. This became the focal point of discussion in the class and the students were given instructions on how, by giving a focus or by putting some catchy phrases/sentences, the summary might be made to capture the reader's attention.

The usual way of summarising is to put in the summary the points/ideas in the same way as they appear in the original text. But here, the students were encouraged to use the points/ideas of the original passage in any effective way they liked in their writing. In this way, the task on summary writing was also used to teach ways to make varied but effective organization of ideas. The students should learn to manipulate the ideas they find in the text. Moreover, the summary will be "a clumsy piece of work", difficult to read or understand, if the students merely "take out sentences and phrases from a text and put them
down just as they are in the summary". The students must learn to use "own words and rearrange the ideas in a new order as (they) chose" (Carroll 1971:72).

Unit 4. Charts and Diagrams - students were given charts and diagrams with comprehension questions to guide them to understand, interpret, and write a short paragraph on them.

Two skills were expected of the students: a) the skill of interpreting the charts and diagrams, and b) that of writing short, meaningful sentences. For the students of agriculture, the skill of representing ideas in the form of diagrams and charts was quite essential besides learning to construct short, apt, grammatical sentences by way of interpreting them. Charts and diagrams are methods by which information can be retrieved at a glance when statistics are involved. The students who were weak in English also felt confident that there were areas where a minimum language skill was required of them.

The charts and diagrams given were of various types and were meant to be representative samples. The students could have been given data and asked to prepare diagrams and charts based on the data, but this task was not done owing to paucity of time.
There were five charts. One of the charts gave details of percentage of expenditure on Defence and Education by nine countries of the world. In one other chart, there were details of the number of students enrolled in the Civil Engineering and Mechanical Engineering courses of a University. While interpreting them and comparing the figures, the students could use specific structures like the comparative and superlative.

The students realized that the charts were the quickest means of retrieving information. To questions like, 'Which countries spend more on education than on defence?' or 'Which country has the highest percentage of expenditure on defence compared to the expenditure on education?', the students were able to give the answers easily.

The prescribed text *Understanding Technical English* by Sudarsanam introduces students to two ways of representing information - tables and tree-diagrams. The table gives a classification of soils with chemical composition. It has blank columns to be filled and it is followed by a descriptive passage on the subject. The students had to read the passage given and fill in the columns in the table suitably. When the students were first asked to read through the passage, many of them could not explain the content but when they were instructed to look
at the chart and fill in the blank columns, they could perform the task after some effort. Then, they could explain the content of the passage in terms of the tabular information. Thus the tabular form of presenting the content of a passage was found to be an easier way of explaining the passage.

Transferring information from a table into a text and vice versa was done taking the materials from the prescribed text (Ibid., 100-101). The students were required to study the table and present the information in a paragraph of continuous writing. In the next exercise, information was given in a text and the students were required to present the content in the form of a table. The first exercise served as a model. It was found that this particular exercise - table-text transformation - fulfilled the specific needs of the students as the subject of their study, agriculture, easily provided for such exercises in information transfer.

The inverted tree diagram or the classification chart was on 'Conductors of electricity'. The students were required to write a short paragraph on the topic taking the details from the chart (Sudarsanam 1988:21).

Unit 5. Report-writing. The researcher chose the general, administrative reporting of events/issues related to agriculture. The first exercise related to the writing
of a report by the Director or Secretary of the Agriculture Department to the State Minister on a matter of topical importance. The other two were on similar lines.

The news item from The Hindu dated 5 January 1991 was used as a base for writing a report. It was discussed in the class, and the reasons for India stopping the import of palm oil from Malaysia were listed and written on the board.

Why has India stopped the import?

1. Flush season in the domestic market.
2. Price has gone up - from $300 to $375 a tonne.
3. The Malaysian government raised the export duty on crude palm oil from 2.68 to 7.42 Malaysian dollars a tonne.

During the discussion some students presented the view that the price went up (listed second above) because the Malaysian government raised the export duty (listed third above). Though there were no clear details in the news item to support the view, assumptions based on weak evidence also generated some discussion.

The students were instructed to write a report. They were asked to imagine that they were the Director or Secretary of the Agriculture Department and had to write to
the Minister for Agriculture asking him to stop the import of palm oil from Malaysia giving valid reasons. The purpose of the report was to convince the government that it should stop the import. The students were also asked to assume that they had to write the report in October 1990. It should be written in such a forceful manner that the news reported on January 5, 1991 should become a reality.

The students were given a few letters that would go with the reports, and letters of information from the Department of Agriculture, Government of Pondicherry for the format. The format of letters/reports was given for an analysis of the conventions to be followed. The students were asked to concentrate on how best they could make use of the given content in writing an effective report.

The students evinced a lot of interest in writing the report. When some students expressed their doubts about the usefulness of the data on the import of petroleum crude from Malaysia, they were told that they could omit what they considered to be irrelevant data, but one student wrote in his report thus: "Since there is the Gulf Crisis and the price of petroleum has gone up, to offset the price in petroleum prices, the import of palm oil must be curtailed. Moreover, there is the flush season."

The news item from The Hindu - 'India stops import of palm oil from Malaysia' - had only 146 words but provided
for meaningful and lively classroom interaction. The content was authentic information and was an up-to-date news of national importance. The students' concentration was on effective manipulation of the data since content and format were already given.

The news on 'hybrid tomato' appearing in The Hindu dated 7 January 1991 formed a suitable material for another report. It was a matter related to agricultural research and so for the students it had some relevance to their subject. They had already experienced writing a report and known the format. With data supplied, they thought of manipulating the data in a more effective way than they had done earlier.

The then Vice-Chancellor of Annamalai University told presspersons that the agriculture faculty of the University had evolved 'a hybrid tomato' and he outlined a scheme to transfer technology from the laboratory to the land and train the village youth. The students were asked to write a report on this subject. The simulated situation was that they had to imagine themselves to be the Head of the Department of Plant Breeding, and write to the Vice-Chancellor about the outcome of the research which the department had undertaken on 'hybrid tomato' and suggest steps to bring the benefit to bear on the rural mass. Since the Vice-Chancellor would have talked to the presspersons
only on the authority of an authentic information/report from the Agriculture Faculty of the University, the report which the students were required to write assumed importance.

The next exercise in report-writing on 'Signs of drinking water shortage' had a similar news item as the basis. The Collector of any district of Tamil Nadu in which there were indications of water shortage in February even before the onset of summer had to write a report on the problem to the department concerned at the state capital and suggest steps to meet the shortage. The students were, therefore, required to present the report from the Collector's point of view.

These exercises gave scope for 'creativity'. First, the students had to view the subject from a particular point of view and time. Secondly, the tense structure of the sentences had to be changed to suit the context. As against sentence-level transformation of sentences, the report provided a meaningful, contextualised situation to use the appropriate tense. The third and last exercise on water-shortage provided more scope for creativity. The students had to use the information to emphasise the effective steps to be taken to meet the water shortage.

To some students with a sound knowledge of English, this would be an opportunity to show their flair for
language. They pictured the situation graphically. The weak students too felt encouraged to do the task. Using the conventional form of writing the report, they made very few modifications in the information provided. A few weak students were poor in changing the sentences to suit the time of the report, but a little guidance from the researcher helped them to overcome the problem.

Unit 6. The home assignment, the writing of an essay in about 400 to 500 words, was aimed at reinforcing in the students the skills of writing already taught and developing these skills further. The theme of the essay was 'the need to preserve forests'.

The materials were newspaper reports, an article on the topic in a newspaper, an article from the Time magazine, and a seminar paper. They were thus from various sources with variations in register to familiarise the students with various modes of representing the information/facts. With the prescribed text Understanding Technical English giving one mode of writing—essays on science—the materials given provided different forms of writing. Moreover, the newspaper clippings and articles on science were meant for the general public and the seminar papers were by specialists meant for others in the field. With seminars and conferences becoming a forum for publishing and gathering information, the students were
given the two papers. The *Indian Express*, a widely circulated national newspaper, and the *Time*, an international magazine, were brought to the class and the students were exposed to their language.

Though the students were given guidelines on studying the problem of deforestation from certain angles, they had the freedom to make use of the materials in any way they thought fit, provided they stuck to the main theme. By being served with materials from various sources, the students were made to understand that data could be collected from any source provided they were relevant to the main theme of their writing. The materials given, they were told, might have a lot of data irrelevant to the topic. They had to learn to sift the grain from the chaff, or to know how to make the data relevant to the topic.

With the practice gained earlier in note-making and summarising in the class, the students could attempt this home assignment using both the skills. They had to collect data from various sources and organize them into a coherent and cohesive text. The students were instructed that they should compulsorily take materials from at least three sources to enhance the effectiveness of the essay. This was done to ensure that the students did not restrict their reading to only one source—say, the seminar paper or the
Time article—and merely summarise it. The students were also required to cite the sources.

The students were instructed to use the data given as much as possible. They could also give their views and comments on the data. Since the purpose of the assignment was to develop in them the ability to read, understand, and interpret the data and use them in an essay giving it a purpose and focus, they were not expected to go to other sources for more details, though they were not discouraged from doing so. Moreover, the details they were given were felt to be adequate for an essay to be submitted in a fortnight.

The home assignment was also given to wean the students away from the traditional rote-learning, examination-oriented and set-book study, for in this assignment there was no scope for memorising any information. The students had to keep the materials before them, collect the relevant data from them, and prepare the essay. Unlike in the examination context, the students were not bound by rigid time and place. Instead, they were given a fortnight in which they could complete the task at their convenience at home/in the hostel. They were not asked to give merely a summary of what they had read but give a focus to the essay with all the ideas collected from the various sources with reference to the central theme.
Note-making and summarising done in the earlier sessions in the class were like sub-units acting in the background to the present task. Here the two skills were reinforced and made meaningful by helping the students with the bigger and more important task of writing an essay/assignment. The assignment was meant to motivate the students to read the texts with an eye for information, which could then be used for academic purposes.

In evaluating the essay, the students were guided to read through it with a focus on the organization of ideas. Once they finished writing the assignment, the following guidelines were given, and during one of the sessions, they reread their essays in the light of these guidelines:

1. Write the topic sentence or the main idea of the paragraph in the margin. If there is more than one main idea, spell them out.

2. If there is only one main idea, identify the relevant and irrelevant ideas. If there is more than one idea, split them and write as many paragraphs as necessary.

3. Once the main ideas and the supporting ideas are given, find out what cohesive devices are used.
4. Find out if the essay has a clear introduction and an ending. If there is no introduction or ending, supply it.

5. Look at each of the re-written paragraphs for the main ideas and relevant supporting ideas.

6. Find out how the main ideas are developed - through specific instances, comparisons, etc.

7. Find out if the conclusion gives a sense of completion to the composition.

The students were asked to evaluate the essay critically with the help of these guidelines. Such guidelines make apparent to the students the criteria with which the compositions are evaluated. They also provide them with the framework to improve their own writing. In the absence of such guidelines, it is natural for the students to work towards mere mechanical perfection in their writing.

In the present case, even though some of the students did not fully succeed in rewriting the essay based on the guidelines, they at least became aware of what they had to look for in an essay and what contributed to an effective presentation of information or ideas.
5.5 CONCLUSION

The course was designed with a view to guide the students through the various stages of writing. Materials were selected from various sources with an eye on agriculture, a subject which is of direct interest to the students. The pre-writing activities, group interaction, peer evaluation, revisions, and the teacher's guidelines have all contributed to creating an atmosphere for effecting writing activity. The students attending the sessions, each of three-hour duration, found them useful and motivating, as is evident from their responses to the statements in the questionnaire administered towards the end of the course, and the desire of some students for a longer duration of the course. They showed interest despite their having a tight schedule of attending classes in their main subjects, science practicals, tests, and assignments.