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## **Writing Skills in the Post-COVID Classroom: A Pilot Study on Learning Loss and Recovery**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted education systems worldwide, forcing an unprecedented transition from physical classrooms to remote and hybrid learning. While much attention has focused on losses in mathematics and reading comprehension, writing ability has received less systematic inquiry despite its foundational role in communication, critical thinking, and academic achievement. This paper investigates the impact of the pandemic on secondary school students' writing skills, drawing evidence from a pilot study conducted in Karnataka, India. The findings reveal noticeable regressions in grammar, vocabulary, structure, coherence, and handwriting. Contributing factors include the digital divide, reduced teacher feedback, and socio-emotional challenges. Yet, promising interventions—such as writing workshops, journaling, collaborative peer editing, and the integration of digital platforms—are supporting recovery. By situating the Indian case within broader global trends, this paper emphasizes the need for multi-level strategies, including policy reform, school-based innovations, teacher training, and parental involvement. Ultimately, writing recovery must not only address learning loss but also reimagine writing pedagogy for resilience in the face of future disruptions.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Writing Skills, Secondary Education, Learning Loss, Digital Divide



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## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in the history of global education. At the peak of school closures in 2020, more than 1.6 billion learners across 190 countries were affected, making it the single largest educational disruption in recent history (UNESCO 4). The sudden shift from classroom instruction to digital or hybrid platforms transformed both the pedagogy of teaching and the psychology of learning. While students and educators displayed resilience, the long-term effects of these disruptions are only beginning to emerge. Among the skills most profoundly affected, writing stands out due to its unique dependency on consistent practice, structured instruction, and timely feedback. Writing is not a passive skill acquired incidentally, like oral fluency; rather, it requires deliberate engagement with grammar, vocabulary, structure, and creativity. The absence of in-person scaffolding and interactive feedback during the pandemic created conditions ripe for regression. As Smith and Hill observe, “the ecology of writing development thrives on the dialogue between student and teacher; its absence leaves gaps that are not easily remedied” (114).

India presents a particularly complex case study. With its vast and diverse student population, wide digital divide, and fragmented approaches to curriculum delivery during the pandemic, Indian classrooms reflect both the challenges and possibilities of educational recovery. This study focuses on secondary school students in Karnataka to examine post-pandemic writing regression and analyze strategies of remediation. By doing so, it contributes to a growing body of research on learning loss while advocating for the centrality of writing in post-COVID educational reform.

## **Literature Review**

The pandemic’s effect on student learning has been studied extensively, with most research emphasizing mathematics and reading comprehension. For example, Kuhfeld et al. found that U.S. students lost approximately five to six months of learning in mathematics and three to four months in reading during the first year of the pandemic (Kuhfeld et al. 12). However, writing, though intrinsically linked to literacy, has received comparatively less scholarly attention.

Writing is a cognitively complex skill that requires both linguistic competence and executive functioning. According to Graham and Harris, effective writing integrates planning, organizing, translating ideas into text, and revising (23). These processes are strengthened



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through iterative cycles of feedback. In the absence of face-to-face instruction, students often lacked timely feedback, leading to weaker drafts and superficial revisions.

Global studies confirm these trends. A 2021 report by the Education Endowment Foundation in the U.K. found that primary and secondary students demonstrated significant setbacks in extended writing tasks, with essays showing weaker vocabulary and less coherent arguments (EEF 9). Similarly, in Australia, Wyse and Goswami reported that students' writing samples during the pandemic exhibited shorter sentence structures and reduced lexical variety (Wyse and Goswami 57).

Indian research echoes these findings. The NCERT's *Post-COVID Learning Assessment Report* highlighted declines in both writing accuracy and fluency among secondary students, noting that "coherence and grammatical accuracy suffered disproportionately during online instruction" (NCERT 18). This aligns with field observations in Karnataka, where the pilot study of this paper was conducted.

Collectively, these studies reveal that while reading can often be sustained through digital exposure, writing requires active production, practice, and guided feedback—all of which were compromised during the pandemic.

### **Methodology**

The pilot study was conducted in Smt. Leelavati R. Charantimath Public School, encompassing both an urban branch and a rural branch in Karnataka, India. The choice of locations was deliberate, aiming to capture disparities created by socioeconomic status and digital access.

### **Participants**

The sample included 72 students from Grades 9 and 10, divided evenly across the two branches. This age group was selected because students are expected to engage in extended writing tasks such as essays, reports, and reflections, which provide measurable indicators of skill regression and recovery.

### **Research Design**

A mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative data consisted of writing samples collected from three time points: pre-pandemic (archived assignments from 2019), mid-pandemic (online submissions from 2021), and post-pandemic (assignments from 2023–24). These samples were analyzed using a standardized rubric assessing grammar, vocabulary, structure, coherence, and handwriting.



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Qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers and 15 students, as well as surveys distributed to all participants. Interviews explored perceptions of writing challenges during remote learning, emotional barriers, and recovery initiatives.

This design ensured both measurable evidence of regression and deeper insights into the lived experiences of students and educators.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Declines in Writing Skills**

Analysis of writing samples revealed significant regressions. Grammar errors increased, particularly in subject-verb agreement and punctuation. Students also displayed a marked reduction in vocabulary range, relying on repetitive and simplistic words. This “lexical shrinkage” aligns with NCERT’s findings across India (NCERT 21).

Structural issues were evident as well. Essays lacked clear organization, with weak transitions and underdeveloped arguments. Paragraphing was inconsistent, and coherence suffered as students struggled to connect ideas logically. Handwriting, particularly among younger students, showed deterioration in legibility and speed. Teachers attributed this to the heavy reliance on typing during remote learning.

These regressions highlight the fragility of writing as a skill—unlike reading comprehension, which can persist through exposure, writing deteriorates rapidly without active practice and feedback.

#### **Contributing Factors**

The study identified three main contributors to writing regression:

1. **The Digital Divide:** Many rural students lacked access to smartphones, laptops, or reliable internet, limiting their participation in online writing activities. Even when devices were available, sharing among siblings often restricted individual usage.
2. **Feedback Deficiency:** Writing development thrives on detailed teacher feedback. Online platforms constrained teachers’ ability to provide personalized, iterative guidance. One teacher remarked, “Correcting essays on a screen is not the same as sitting with a student and explaining line by line.”
3. **Socio-Emotional Disruptions:** Anxiety, loss of routine, and lack of peer interaction dampened motivation. Writing, which requires focus and creativity, was particularly vulnerable to these emotional stresses. Research confirms that socio-emotional well-being directly correlates with writing fluency (Wyse and Goswami 62).



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## Recovery Initiatives

Post-pandemic, schools adopted various strategies to rebuild writing proficiency.

**Writing Workshops:** Teachers conducted focused sessions on grammar and essay composition, giving students intensive practice.

**Daily Journaling:** Students were encouraged to maintain reflective journals, fostering fluency and self-expression.

**Collaborative Editing:** Peer-review exercises encouraged critical engagement with writing.

**Digital Tools:** Google Docs enabled real-time feedback, while apps such as Grammarly gamified grammar learning.

Students who engaged consistently with these interventions demonstrated measurable progress. One rural student shared, “At first, I struggled to write even a paragraph, but journaling every day made it easier.”

## Global Comparisons

The findings mirror global experiences. In the U.S., research revealed that middle school students’ essays in 2022 were shorter and less coherent than pre-pandemic samples (Kuhfeld et al. 14). In Japan, writing classes reported increased reliance on formulaic sentence structures, reflecting limited creative practice (Mori 44). These parallels underscore the universality of writing regression while also highlighting context-specific challenges such as India’s digital divide.

## Implications

The findings carry several implications for educational policy and practice.

- 1. Policy Reform:** Writing must be recognized as a core competency in national recovery plans. Current initiatives often emphasize reading and numeracy, neglecting writing’s role in shaping critical thinking. Policymakers should integrate structured writing recovery programs within broader learning frameworks.
- 2. School-Level Innovations:** Schools must embed writing across curricula rather than confining it to language classes. Interdisciplinary approaches—such as science reports, reflective history essays, and mathematics explanations—can reinforce writing practice.
- 3. Teacher Training:** Teachers require professional development in digital assessment tools and blended pedagogies. Training should focus on how to provide effective feedback in both online and offline settings.



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**4. Parental Engagement:** Parents can supplement formal instruction by encouraging writing at home. Activities such as storytelling, letter writing, or family journals can reinforce classroom learning.

**5. Equity Considerations:** Recovery strategies must address socioeconomic disparities. Rural and underprivileged students need targeted support, including access to digital infrastructure and remedial programs.

### Conclusion

The post-COVID classroom faces a dual challenge: recovering from past learning losses while preparing students for a future where resilience and adaptability are paramount. Writing, a cornerstone of communication and critical thinking, must be central to this mission. The pilot study in Karnataka reveals that writing regressions were significant but not irreversible. With targeted interventions—writing workshops, journaling, collaborative editing, and digital tools—students have begun to regain lost ground. The findings echo global patterns while also emphasizing the unique challenges posed by India’s digital divide. Moving forward, writing recovery should not merely aim to restore pre-pandemic levels but to reimagine pedagogy for the 21st century. By integrating hybrid approaches, leveraging technology, and fostering resilience, education systems can cultivate a generation of confident, articulate writers prepared for the uncertainties of the future

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