

COMMON WRITING CHALLENGES OF THE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

Md. Alaul Alam, Lecturer
Department of English, Prime University, Dhaka, Bangladesh
Email - malaulalam@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

The study explores the common writing challenges of undergraduate students at tertiary level. The study was qualitative in approach. Data were collected from the composition writing of the students of first and second semester of five departments, i.e. CSE, EEE, English, Law and Business departments at a private university in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Forty students were selected and among them, twenty students were taken from the first semester and the rest twenty from the first semester. Data were also collected from the teachers' interview along with observation and in this connection, four ELT teachers were interviewed individually. The major findings showed that the challenges in verb, capitalization, number, passive mood, the use of gerund and infinitive, sentence arrangement, article, pronoun and spelling mistakes were common in students' writing. However, the study sought the causes of these drawbacks of the undergraduate students and explored some remedies at the end of the study.

Key Word: Common writing challenges; undergraduate students; Nonnative English learners;

1. INTRODUCTION:

Writing is very tough and crucial for the second language learners and even native speakers sometimes fail to write standard writing (Kukurs, 2012). Errors affect the writing of the L2 learners badly. Before the seventies, errors were considered as the weakness of language learning. After that, the introduction of Corder's theory of error analysis brought a revolutionary change in this field and till then, making errors have been contributing to achieving the maximum output through the use of error analysis theory. However, lack of the proper guidance of the English teachers and the demotivated attitudes of the learners have made the thing harder to be solved (Stern, 1983, cited in Ireen Sayeed, 2016). No doubt, there is a difference between errors and mistakes. The study focuses on the types of challenges, L2 learners encounter in their writing. In the context of Bangladesh, students learn English for almost 12 to 14 years and by the period of learning, they learn every aspect of English language. But the fact is that students make a list of common mistakes despite having sound theory-based grammar knowledge and they have the ability to identify these mistakes if they are conscious enough to do this. Corder (1967) opined that it seems not surprising when L2 learners face challenges in their writing because their first language has a great influence on learning second language and thus while writing in the second language, there occur mistakes.

English has been one of the major courses taught from class one to class 12 and at the university level, learners are scheduled to study English compulsorily in the first and second semester. As mistakes are easy to be corrected by the learners themselves and so, this study explores a number of common challenges of the tertiary learners in their writings and shows the reasons of such committing. Besides, it tries to provide the possible remedies which are frequently found in the learners' writings.

2. RATIONAL OF THE STUDY:

Writing is always laborious and challenging and it poses a number of problems for the learners (Langan, 1987) & Gunning (1998). It is accepted as a common conception that the problems of L2 learners are enormous in writing and even the native learners in most cases never master in writing (Nunan 1999). So, it would not be surprising when second language learners encounter difficulties in terms of acquiring writing skill. The present study explores common tendency of the tertiary students in their writing which will make the concerned alert and help make some initiatives in reducing these challenges of the students to an optimum extent. Most of the previous studies highly concentrated on the analysis of the errors in the writing of the student's home and abroad. This study is different from other studies because it only deals with the common challenges of the students in writing. The study will in general, help language teachers, students, material developers and policy makers to go into the depth of findings and to have the necessary actions to the development of English learning especially in terms of reducing the mistakes of the students in their writing.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. What are the common challenges the students of tertiary level encounter in their writing?
2. What are the causes of committing these?
3. What are the probable remedies of these mistakes?

4. METHODOLOGY:

This research was qualitative in nature (Creswell, 2008). The study was conducted among the students who were studying at first and second semester of CSE, EEE, English, Law and Business departments at a private university. All the students have to have a compulsory English course in first and second semester. For conducting the study, forty students were selected randomly whereas 20 students were from first semester and the rest 20 from second semester. The students of first semester were given the topic 'Your Country' and the students of second semester were given the topic 'Your Native Village'. Both the duration of time and the length (word limit) of the topics were set by the researcher. Furthermore, they were well informed that this writing would not affect their result, rather it was being taken for conducting a research and for investigating what types of common mistakes especially in writing university students commit. Data were collected from the writing of the students. Open ended questions were used for the teachers' interview along with observation schedule of the teachers. In this connection, four teachers were interviewed individually. The collected primary data were transcribed and analyzed thematically (Creswell, 2008). Triangulation was carried out to identify what was common in terms of mistakes and to find out the gaps observing the data of the respondents.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW:

A great sum of works have been accomplished previously regarding students' mistakes and errors in writing in many countries where English is taught compulsorily as the second language. Previous studies showed that L2 learners have huge problems in writing and in this connection, Nunan (1999) stated that writing in second language is very challenging and tough for the learners. The studies of Nunan (1989), Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014), Darus and Ching (2009), Javed and Umer (2014) and Heaton (1979) revealed that L2 learners committed huge mistakes in their academic writing and in most cases they did common mistakes which were not hard to be avoided. The common mistakes in article, spelling, verbs, punctuations and the mechanism of writing were found in the L2 learners' writing. Croll and Willson (1995), Byrne (1988), McCuen & Winkler (2000) stated in their studies that most of the students made mistakes in punctuations and the reasons of making mistakes are many. Moreover, McCuen & Winkler (2000) stated that as there is no universal rule of punctuation, students are prone to making mistakes with punctuation and their studies also revealed that students grew some common logics regarding common mistakes but at the time of their writing they forgot to use the correct punctuation in the right place. Salem (2007) argued that most of the students got puzzled when they were asked to write on a certain topic because they did not know how to start and how to conclude the writing. Besides, they have common problems with grammar and punctuation. Abu (2001) supports the argument and add some other information such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and mechanics.

John C. Mellen's (1975) explored in the study that students in different levels committed common errors. He showed that mistakes in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, fragments and run-ons, awkward constructions, agreement, and word choice were common in his study. Later the researchers like Izzo (2002), Nada (2002) supported Milan's findings and similarly gave some suggestions regarding the remedies of common mistakes in writing among the L2 learners. Almarwany (2008) was in the same echo and stated that grammar, organization and punctuation were the common mistakes done by the students.

Ahmed (1999) showed in his study that mistakes in articles are very frequent among the Bangladeshi students. In this connection, Hourani (2008) said that errors occurred due to the influence between inter and intra language of the EFL learners. Mustaque (2014) and Fahmida (2010) also revealed some findings in their studies that included errors with verbs, prepositions, article, organizational problems, spelling and punctuation.

Hamid (2007) found that teachers' feedback system was not clear enough to have a positive impact in minimizing mistakes in students' writing and it needs to be more effective in getting out the maximum output.

However, the present study is concerned with the writing challenges of the students and the common mistakes are meant to indicate such types of mistakes that can be easily corrected by the learners themselves using their 12 to 14 years learning experience.

6. ANALYSIS:

Data were collected directly from students' writing. The incorrect part is underlined whereas the correct part is bracketed presented in the analysis.

6.1. Spelling mistakes

The data collected from the writing of the students of first semester are given in the following.

- a) We live in a very beautifull country. (beautiful)
- b) Their are 64 districts in our country. (there)

The following data were collected from the writing of the students of second semester.

- a) Travalng plays a very significient role to human life. (Traveling, significant)
- b) I want to Shat Gumbuj Mosque last month. (Went)

Spelling mistake is one of the commonest mistakes for the students of all levels irrespective of all ages. The mistakes with spelling are considered as the great mistake and obviously students' grades are directly affected for their incorrect spelling in writings. It was found after evaluating all the scripts that there was hardly any writing paper free from spelling mistakes. In the first example of the student from the first semester 'beautiful' is mistakenly written. Generally there is no hard and fast rules of spelling, but if the word takes a suffix 'full' and gets united, then one 'L' will be vanished and the word will be like 'beautiful'. In the second sentence 'Their' is used incorrectly. Besides 'their' is a possessive adjective that cannot go alone and it needs a noun after the adjective. So the pronoun 'There' will be the correct spelling and that will be used as Introductory in the sentence. In the examples of the students of second semester, Travalling, Significient and Want are misspelt.

6.2. Mistakes in verbs

The following examples are taken from the students of first semester.

- a) There also many kinds of crops in Bangladesh such as rice, jute, wheat etc. (are)
- b) Different countries has different traditions. (have)

These are quoted from the students of second semester

- a) We can visited any place by bus now a days. (visit)
- b) Many rivers are look so pretty in our country. (are/look)

Verb is considered as living being of a sentence as no sentence makes a complete sense without the proper use of verb. The data revealed that the students did common mistakes in verbs. From the writing of first semester, it is found that in the first example there is no 'be (main) verb' and without a main verb, no sentence is formed. In the second example, 'Has' is a singular verb as the subject is plural, verb will be 'Have' (plural). Similarly, the students of second semester made mistakes when they used past form after the modal verb 'Can' in the first example and in the second example, either 'Are or Look' has to be used but two verbs cannot match the tense.

6.3. Mistakes in capitalization

The examples are taken from the students' scripts of the first semester.

- a) I love my Country very much. (country)
- b) My friend and i love sight-seeing in the country side. (I)

The examples are from the second semester students:

- a) I like various traditional Food. (food)
- b) There Are many People who love their village. (are, people)

It was found from the scripts of the students that they made mistakes in capitalization. There was hardly any script written by the students free from this kind of problem. Though students learn the rules of capitalization several times, they consciously or subconsciously make mistakes in capitalization. In the first phase of the example, the word 'Country' was written with capital letter but at the middle, small letter must be used and in

the second example, the letter I is written in capital form but here it was used in small form. Similarly, the three words like food, are and people were mistaken in the form of capitalization.

6.4. Mistakes in number

These first two sentences are the examples of first semester students:

- a) Bangladesh has many attractive place such as Sundarbans, Cox's bazar and Shatgombuj Mosque etc. (places)
- b) Some came from other community. (Communities)

The writing of second semester students are:

- a) Every year many tourist come to our country. (tourists)
- b) It is one of the greenest country of the world. (countries)

It is found from the data that students commonly committed mistakes in number (singular, plural). Many in the first example and other in the second example are considered as plural determiners and so after many and other plural nouns have to be ensured. In the second two sentences 'Many' and 'One of the' follow plural countable nouns so that instead of tourist and country, they will be tourist and countries.

6.5. Mistakes in tense

The first two lines are quoted from first semester:

We celebrated many festivals every year. (Celebrate)

Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Buddhists lives here with peace and harmony. (Live)

The following lines are from second semester students:

It become independent on the 16th December in 1971. (Became)

The place becoming more progressive by solving these problems one by one. (Is)

Major mistakes are found in the first two sentences because students could not use the correct the tenses. In the first sentence the time phrase Every year confirms present tense, so the correct form of verb will be 'celebrate' instead of celebrated and in the other sentence the subject is plural and in case of present indefinite tense we need not add s' or es with the verb if the subject is plural. The correct answer will be 'Live'. The second two examples quoted by the students of second semester deal with the correct use of tenses. In the first one, Become will change into Became as it is simple past and in the second one, there needs a continuous form that is, auxiliary and verb ing as we know verb ing always needs auxiliary if it turns into continues.

6.6. Mistakes in passive sense

The following examples were taken from the scripts of the students of first semester:

- a) The Padma, The Meghna and The Jamuna are consider as main rivers in our country (considered)
- b) The mother language is Bangla which was achieve in 1952. (achieved)

The second semester students wrote in such way:

- a) The construction of Lalbag Fort was commence in 1678. (commenced)
- b) The mosque originally referred to sixty pillared mosque. (was referred)

Students did huge mistakes in terms of identifying active and passive verbs in their writing. In the first examples, students did neither active nor passive, rather they wrote incorrect sentences in their scripts. Subject of the passive sentence is always inactive and so after auxiliary verb, past participle of the verb is required. The similar thing happened among the students of second semester but there was a bit exception in the second sentence of the second semester students, where it was found that in case of passive, auxiliary verb is missing. 'The mosque' was an inactive subject, so it could not refer anything, rather the correct form will be 'was referred'.

6.7. Incorrect use of gerund and infinitive

- a) Village farmers invite their friends to celebrating the Nabanna Festival. (celebrate)
- b) For win the world, Bangladesh cricket team is playing. (winning)

The writings from the second semester students in the following:

- a) We visited Bagerhat, Khulna especially to observed the big mosque.(observe)
- b) To travelling to Khulna was interesting and for go there we hired a nice bus. (travel)

Using gerund (Verb+ ing) and infinitive (To +base verb) is a very challenging issue for the students. In the first two examples, 'To celebrating and For win' were incorrectly used in their scripts. It was required to write 'To celebrate' in the first sentence and 'To travel' in the second sentence because after infinitive base verb is needed and after for verb (ing) is needed. In the second phase, students wrote 'to observed and to travelling' which are incorrect and the correct forms will be 'to observe and to travel' respectively.

6.8. Mistakes in sentence arrangements

These are the examples of the students of first semester:

- a) It's about 30 lacs people sacrificed their lives to free their mother land from Pakistani barbarous army.(About 30 lacs people sacrificed their lives to free their mother land from Pakistani barbarous army)
- b) The four main rivers are Bangladesh. (The four main rivers are in Bangladesh)

Examples from the students of second semester are here

- a) Catching fish in the river I saw some fishermen .(I saw some fishermen catching fish)
- b) Dhaka is the largest city of the country which is our capital.(Dhaka which is the largest city of the country , is our capital)

The data revealed that students were not able to arrange their sentences according to the proper sentence order. The first two sentences of the first semester students stated that students had problems in sentence arrangement. From the first sentence, the word 'It's' should be omitted to make sense of the sentence, similarly, in the second sentence, preposition 'IN' should be placed before Bangladesh to make the sentence meaningful. In the second phase, 'Catching fish in the river' did not talk about the subject 'I' rather it talked about the fishermen and so, mismatching was found there and in the last sentence of the students of second semester, the clause 'Which is our capital' should be referred to Dhaka city but in the sentence, this clause referred to the 'Country'. Consequently this part was mistakenly used.

6.9. Mistakes in article

The following two sentences are the examples of the first semester students:

- a) 16th December is the victory Day of our country. (The 16th December)
- b) Now Bangladesh is a independent country like many other countries of the world. (an)

Students of second semester wrote in this way:

- a) It is one of a greatest architectural sites in Bangladesh .(the)
- b) It is a important place in our country. (an)

From the data, it is found that students made mistakes in article frequently. The first example of the first phase, there is an absence of article 'The' before 16th December because article 'The' is required before remarkable days and in the second sentence, students mistakenly wrote A before vowel. Actually we use 'An' before any vowel. The first sentence of the students of second semester contained an article mistake. Article 'The' is required before superlative degree. The last sentence of the second phase repeated the same mistake as it was in the second sentence of the first phase.

6.10. Mistakes in pronoun

The mistakes of the students of first semester are as:

- a) Our country got it's freedom from Pakistan in 1971 .(its)
- b) Bangladeshi people have there dress patterns.(their)

The mistakes of the writings of the students of second semester are as follows:

- a) It is us who made a plan to go there.(we)
- b) Me and some of my friends made an interesting trip to Bagerhat from Dhaka.(I)

The data collected from the writing scripts of the students showed that pronoun mistakes were very common among the students in their writes up. The first example from the first semester presented IT'S wrongly instead of ITS. Here ITS is a pronoun whereas IT'S indicates IT IS. In the second sentence, There is wrongly used, rather the correct form will be the possessive pronoun 'THEIR'. Similarly, in the first example of the writing of the students of second semester US is mistakenly written because after BE Verb, the subjective form of the pronoun is required. So, it should be WE instead of US and in the last sentence 'Me' is an incorrect form, rather it will be "I" as subjective form of pronoun is required in the subject.

7. DATA FROM TEACHERS' INTERVIEW:

It is found from the teachers' interviews that majority of the teachers said that they witness some common challenges while evaluating the students' scripts. A list of mistakes of the students which appear before the teachers remain shaped with the common attitudes of the learners in terms of writing any paper in the classroom or in the examination scripts. One of the teachers stated that students make a number of grammatical challenges and these occur due to the differences between English and Bangla language. In many cases teachers get habituated to observe these kinds of mistakes into the students' scripts. He shared his opinion in the following lines:

"The challenges in tense, punctuation, verb, number and spelling are very common in the writing of the students of tertiary level and it seems interesting when an individual does the same mistakes frequently all the times whenever he/she makes a writes up: I have ten years experiences in conducting English language classes and while taking writing classes, I notice that most of the students pass a very hard time and the classes seem boring to them. I have a keen observation about the mistakes committing in the students' papers that are almost deep rooted and when I enforce the students to break down the tendency of the mistakes they make, they do not consider it seriously, and rather there happens a series of the same mistakes in their writing".

Another English language teacher stated that in the classroom when he teaches writing, the most frequent challenges he has identified through his observation are punctuation and the problems with verbs and tenses. He stated in such a way regarding the common mistakes of the students:

"In Bangladesh, most of the students at tertiary level make almost the same types of problems such as the mistakes with verbs and tense that can be categorized with the single point of view: whenever I have a look into any writing script of my students, repeatedly these mistakes are found. Further he added that maximum teachers in our country follow grammar translation method in which students are bound to memorize the rules, consequently they do not find any interest in the class. Besides, there is hardly any application of the rules which they memorize.

The other teacher also said that students have the tendency to commit the same mistakes all the times because they do not take the feedback granted for learning. He also said that in every writing class, he has to observe the common mistakes such as mistakes in tense, punctuations, articles and verb related mistakes which can be easily avoided if students are attentive to the teachers' feedback. He asserted that

"Lack of motivations is one of the major causes for doing mistakes in their scripts. Besides, it needs proper attention of the students as well as determinations to get the maximum output in respect of correcting common mistakes."

All the teachers stated almost the similar reasons of the common mistakes of the students. Here describes the speech of a teacher clarifying the reasons of common mistakes:

"First, students memorize so many grammatical rules but they can get hardly scope to apply them in their real circumstances because the rules have had a far away from the context of writing. Secondly, teachers don't have enough time to give feedback for every student's writes up because class time is very limited. Thirdly, teachers only underline the mistakes students commit but do not give the clarification of the underlining incorrect parts of their writings. Fourthly as in the context of Bangladesh the class size is very big, it is very tough for a teacher to control such a big class taking them all the necessary equipment. In most cases, students do not keep concentrating on the teachers' lectures, rather, they do their own jobs sitting in the classroom. Sixthly, teachers only focus on completing his assigned task, not to discuss the error made by the students in the class."

8. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS:

It is found from the analysis of the study that students made common challenges in spelling, punctuation and sentence arrangement. The mistakes in spelling, punctuation and in sentence arrangement were frequently found in the scripts of the students though they completed almost 12 years of learning English from class one to intermediate level, the mistakes they commonly committed were adhere and remained rooted throughout their student life. The findings are the same as Nunan (1999) and Fahamida.B (2010)and Brown (2001)

From the study of Abu (2001) I also get the same findings about the common mistakes of the students in writing.

The study showed that students were indifferent to their mistakes they have been habituated to committing in their writing or either they did not try to make them correct despite being repeatedly instructed from the teachers. The teachers' interview also includes the information that majority of the students at the tertiary level do the common mistakes and teachers can easily assume in which parts of students' writing can be affected with mistakes. The researcher being a teacher of the tertiary level observed that students hardly receive feedback of their homework or classwork due to large class size and limited time frame. However students' attitudes are somehow responsible in creating consciousness to avoid the common mistakes and in many cases, they did not take feedback seriously.

As shown in the study, students made common mistakes with verbs, tense and passive sense. These three grammatical issues are much interconnected because tense and verb are inseparable soul of a sentence whereas one is affected, the other will be affected too and similarly, whether the verb of a sentence does work or not is traced from the active or passive sense of a student. The teachers found from the observations of the class that students keep hazardous while selecting verb, tense and passive forms in their writings. The findings are similar to those of Wee et al. (2010) and Zheng and Park (2013),

As evident from the study, students did mistakes with articles and pronouns and these mistakes occur in almost all of the writings of the students because in most cases, students are not conscious enough to follow the exact rules of using article and pronouns although they have theoretical knowledge but in case of any writing, they subconsciously do this. From the teachers' interview, it is found that mistakes in article and pronoun are very common among the students of the tertiary level which can be easily avoided. Mustaque (1999) supported the findings of the present study and he also got the same findings in his study.

From the teachers' interview, it is stated that feedback to the students with proper motivation can bring the positive impacts among the learners in terms of reducing common mistakes in their writings.

9. REMEDIES:

Based on the teachers' interview, the study outcomes some remedies and the classroom observation of the researcher also has some implications by which these common mistakes can be reduced. The study shows that motivation, feedback and grammar analysis are the three driving forces which should be introduced in terms of minimizing common mistakes in English writing of the students. Moreover, students and teachers should stand on the same platform and continue working at their level best in this vein so as to get the maximum output in reducing common mistakes.

Increasing motivation can be a good way to recover the gap between the teachers and the learners and to accelerate this, learners will be given priority on selecting their topics in order to practice writing. Besides, students should be notified that what advantages they will have if they do their writing with all the corrections. In this regard, teachers should not be harsh to the students' mistakes, rather take them courage to learn from the mistakes.

Giving communicative feedback is very important than traditional feedback. In the traditional feedback, teachers only underline the incorrect part of the writing and the application of this system is not enough to motivate the students towards corrections. On the other hand, communicative feedback makes the students eager to learn about the mistakes and so, they try to overcome the mistakes. Teachers should let the students engage in self-correction and it can be the best way of overcoming the mistakes. In addition, teachers should check out each script of the learners and give them oral and written feedback and to do this, large classroom should not be maintained to reach the every student for giving feedback with examples.

Teachers should give the students a clear cut conception regarding grammar and make the grammatical rules analyze before the students in a very simple way so that everybody can understand them. In this connection,

more examples should be given than the theory and similarly, interesting course curriculum should be introduced for the students. Besides, they should make the learners inclined to take class test on various topics in order to evaluate their mistakes.

Finally, students should have determination to get rid of their common mistakes and they should be attentive to the class. Regular attendance in the class is a must to have maximum output in checking out the common mistakes.

10. CONCLUSION:

The study explores the common challenges of the students at the undergraduate level in English writing. It is found that 10 types of challenges students frequently face in their writing. The mistakes in verb, capitalization, number, passive mood, the use of gerund and infinitive, sentence arrangement, article, pronoun and spelling mistakes are common in students' writing. Moreover, it is found from the teachers' interview that majority of the students make common mistakes in their writing that can occur from conscious and subconscious state of mind. Major findings show that most of the students are very reluctant to learning English, rather, they are compelled to learn only to pass the examination. In this study, the reasons of common mistakes made by the undergraduate university students were sought. Besides, it suggested a remedy so that these types of mistakes are easy to be corrected by the students. Obviously in this regard, teachers can play a very significant role to be the mediators giving positive outlook and help the students identify the common mistakes and make them ready for self-correction. Finally, if teachers help the students practice based on the findings of the study, no doubt, there will have hardly mistakes in students' writing.

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