Nature of errors and mistakes in the English writings of graduating students in Bangladesh: A case study

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Abstract

There is no denying that writing is quite tiresome in both second language teaching and learning situations. And so, selecting an appropriate strategy to provide the learners with necessary feedback in their writings seems to be a complicated task in language pedagogy. The present researchers observe that despite the writing practice of English for about 12 years in Bangladesh, the tertiary students commit mistakes and errors. They, therefore, feel numerous studies should be conducted to find an effective means of feedback for mistakes and errors the students make. Thus, this paper identifies the nature of mistakes and errors in their writings and finds out remedial procedures by means of knowing the factors contributing to the recurrence of these errors and mistakes year after year. To obtain data, some writing samples of paragraphs in groups, business letters, and letters of application have been taken from some undergraduate students of a university, and an opinion survey of teachers with an open-ended questionnaire has also been conducted. The study concludes with some pedagogical recommendations based on relevant concerns.

Keywords Errors and mistakes, Undergraduate students, Bangladesh, Pedagogy

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Making mistakes and errors by the students in their second language learning is quite natural. But in spite of a long attachment to academic English up to the tertiary level, it is agreeable that the standard of English performance of the learners in Bangladesh is not up to the mark. Consequently, even though they are the students of the highest institutions, they are not free from mistakes and errors in different areas of writings. In such a situation, if they do not get proper feedback on the basis of reasons behind these mistakes and

errors, the problems of the students that at present exist will remain unchanged. Therefore, the current study examines and analyses some commonly observed errors and mistakes and searches for reasons behind them, and discusses further implications by raising teachers and the learners' awareness for effective teaching and learning in the classroom. Therefore, the present research aims at exploring some common grammatical errors and mistakes the graduating students usually make in learning English in Bangladesh context in pursuance of replies to the following queries:

a. What are the natures of grammatical errors and mistakes the graduating students in Bangladesh usually make in their writings?
b. Why do they make mistakes and errors, in spite of the study of English for a long time?
c. What implications do these errors and mistakes suggest about classroom teaching and learning?

2. Literature review
The review of the literature for this study has been presented in three different sections. The first section gives an overview of errors and mistakes; the second section covers studies on errors and mistakes made in other than Bangladesh, and studies in Bangladesh related to errors and mistakes have been presented in the third section.

2.1. Errors and mistakes-an overview
Mistakes and errors are commonly observed in students' writings in their second language learning. Though mistakes and errors are outwardly synonymous, it is essential to make a distinction between them in order to analyze them from a proper standpoint. In marking the distinction between error and mistake, Corder (1967: 166-67; 1973: 257-59) states that mistakes are non-systematic errors such as 'slips of the tongue' and 'slips of the pen', while errors refer to systematic errors which often occur in second language learning. Likewise, Selinker and Gass (1994: 102) state that mistakes are the slips of the tongue and usually one-time-only events. Therefore, the person who makes them is able to recognize them as mistakes and correct them when necessary. An error, on the other hand, usually occurs at the system level and is likely to occur repetitively and not recognized by the learner as an error. Hence, only the teachers or researchers would locate them. At about the same line, (Ellis 1999: 51) defines error as a 'deviation from the norms of the target language as a result of lack of knowledge' and 'lack of competence', whereas a mistake is the performance failure of learners' competence. Following the same vein, Brown (2000: 217) regards mistakes,

in both native and second language situations, as a 'failure to utilize a known system correctly' and 'can be self-corrected when attention is drawn'. By contrast, an "error" is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage incompetence of the learner.

And it is in the light of the above differentiations we have tried to analyse students' errors and mistakes, but the emphasis has been given set on the errors which should be taken into special consideration.

2.2. Studies on errors and mistakes in countries other than Bangladesh

Some multinational studies reveal that mistakes and errors in the writings of second or foreign language learners are worldwide phenomena. Thus, in a research paper aiming at exploring the causes of grammatical errors in writing, Mohammed (2015) has studied the preliminary master research proposal of selected 15 Iraqi students in the Faculty of Information System at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Results showed that Iraqi students in UKM committed errors in numerous categories like tenses, prepositions, articles, active and passive voice, verbs, and morphological errors. However, the highest number of errors was generated in prepositions (22.1%). Furthermore, it has also been found that the errors mostly occurred due to the interference of the grammatical and linguistic system of the participants' mother language with their writings in the target language (i.e., Interlingual source).

In a similar study, Mohammed (2016) has discussed seven categories of errors the English syntactic level most commonly made by 125 fresher students at Abu Dhabi University. The mistakes include errors in the use of verbs (the use of tense, phrase, aspect, voice, verb formation, concord, finite, non-finite verbs), adverbial clauses (comparison, purpose, result, concession, manner), sentence structure, articles (definite and indefinite), relative clauses, interlingua errors, (structural misrepresentation, simplification), and prepositions. The researcher has concluded that L1 interference in processing English syntactic structures is the most common source of these errors.

In another study, Younes and Albalawi (2015) explore some commonly observed writing problems among the forty sophomore female students in the Department of English and Translation at Tabuk University. Students' writing samples and their questionnaire surveys have been used to enquire about the factors responsible for the problems they face in their English writings. The findings reveal different types of writing problems in the use of prepositions, articles, tenses, syntax, and subject-verb agreement. The findings also show the absence of punctuation, the misuse of punctuation marks, and spelling

problems in substitution, omission, addition, disordering, segmentation, and unrecognizable words. The findings from the questionnaire reveal that factors like poor input resulting in poor output, teachers' use of L1 (Arabic) to simplify the rules and facilitate grammar learning, and their instruction focusing on rote rules and memorization, etc. are responsible for students' writing weaknesses.

In the same way, Ngangbam (2016) has explored the English syntactic problems in the writings of 60 native Arabic speaking freshers in the English language class of Mutah University. Fifteen categories of more frequent errors have been identified to find out the causes of syntactic error in areas of weaknesses and problems that tend to occur in writing compositions. Results indicate that the performance problems that occur in the compositions were due to L1 interference, misuse of sentence fragments, overuse, and lack of grammatical knowledge, formation, and developmental errors.

2.3. Studies on errors and mistakes in Bangladesh

In the teaching-learning context of Bangladesh, generally, writing performance is massively tested for grades or scores in the examinations. Therefore, writing is seemingly a vast area of productive skills that our students and teachers are concerned with. Accordingly, a good number of researches into students' errors and mistakes have been conducted here in Bangladesh.

In a study, Karim, Fathema, and Hakim (2015) have discussed the errors on the usage of verbs in writing English essays by following the method of comparison and contrast produced by 36 tertiary level EFL learners at International Islamic University Chittagong (IIUC), Bangladesh. This study examines the errors of agreement with verbs, missing verbs, misuse of verbs, misuse of past tense after infinitive, and misuse of "to have" verb. The purpose of the study is to show the errors of verb usage to the tertiary level EFL learners, to draw the attention of the teachers to the areas of problems in written English, and to help the learners to overcome the verbal errors.

In a similar study, with an aim at presenting phonological and grammatical errors in written and spoken English in Bangladesh, Hossain and Uddin (2015) have examined the first-year undergraduates in the department of English at Jahangirnagar University and found errors in pronunciation, the use of grammar, articles, auxiliaries, and prepositions extracted from their recorded speeches and written scripts of English. The result shows that the highest errors are found in the use of prepositions, i.e., 40%, errors found in the use of articles are 30.87 % and errors in using

auxiliary verbs are 29.13%. The study has also reflected the possible reasons behind the errors in written and spoken English and their probable solutions. The study, finally, ends with some recommendations for effective remedial measures and feedback techniques so that students can develop their spoken English.

With a selection of 300 students from ten different tertiary level institutions from seven major locations of Bangladesh to find out the mistakes and errors, Khan and Akter (2011), on the other hand, have prepared a report in which they analysed those mistakes and errors that they found to have occurred most frequently. The findings of their study reveal an unwelcome picture of students' writing flaws in several areas with the highest record in spelling (*n-573*) and the lowest record in pronoun (*n-19*) mistakes. Likewise, the number of mistakes made with the use of numbers is 261, wrong use of words is 249, capitalization is 247, the use of preposition is 236, the use of tense is 187, the use of articles is 146, redundancy is 111, and the number of mistakes found in the subject-verb agreement is 97. Furthermore, their study also indicates mistakes in sentence-level, showing erroneous sentence production. On observation of alarming mistakes in word and sentence levels, the report of Khan and Akter advocates using innovative means of teaching at the primary, secondary, and even tertiary levels to improve the current state of students' writing problems in English. The study also recommends incorporating numerous ELT training and pedagogic programs to enhance the teachers' and the learners' awareness of effective classroom teaching and learning.

Along the same vein, Afrin (2016) has conducted a study with eighty-nine non-English major undergraduate students studying in several departments of Stamford University Bangladesh through some writing samples and a questionnaire survey, and a semi-structured interview of 12 English teachers to know their opinions and attitudes on students' writing problems in English. The statistical summary of the writing mistakes shows that spelling mistakes rank the highest, i.e., 23.04%; misuse of tense is the second most common problem, i.e., 18.66%; errors of the subject-verb agreement are 14.37%; punctuation mistakes constitute 10.27%, and mistakes made with fragments are 6.17%; the unnecessary use of preposition shows 6.07%; the mistakes made in the use of number are 4.90%; the mistakes found in the right use of pronoun and references are 4.61%; mistakes identified in the misuse of words and the choice of words are 4.19%; the number of mistakes found in relation to the use of articles is 4.09%, and the mistakes recognized in capitalization is 3.58%. Regarding spelling mistakes, she observes that they occur seemingly due to students'

tendency to spell words in accordance with their pronunciations. However, a lot of spelling mistakes presumably occur because of L1 interference. And the spelling errors are found in the form of letter omission, addition, transposition, substitution, etc. Mistakes in using tense were identified in mixing both present and past tense in the same paragraph or sentence. She has also observed that some students have made fragments in writing complex sentences. Many sentence fragments, comma splice, and run-on sentences have been found due to wrong punctuation. Some long sentences of the students without proper punctuation marks have been identified.

The above studies dealing with errors and mistakes committed by the graduating students at home and abroad have paved the way for our research. The study of Karim, Fathema, and Hakim (2015) conducted in Bangladesh has dealt with only the usage of verbs. However, our study repeats what Khan and Akter (2011), Afrin (2016), and Hossain and Uddin (2015) have found in their studies, but goes further with the identification of some other errors and mistakes. Moreover, this study has tried to differentiate, to some extent, between errors and mistakes in line with Corder's (1967) demarcation criterion between errors and mistakes. Besides, the focus of our study has also been the factors contributing to making errors and mistakes and subsequent implications for them.

3. Methodology

The current study deals with the mistakes and errors of different natures that the graduating students of a university in Bangladesh made in their English writings. Following a qualitative approach and conducting a descriptive analysis, the study concentrates mainly on the problems in the sentence level of tertiary students' writings. The study uses 60 students' writing samples to identify the nature of mistakes and errors committed by them. In order to know the reasons behind the errors and mistakes students generally make and to suggest necessary remedial measures and pedagogical implications, we have conducted an open-ended questionnaire survey of 8 male and female teachers of English who conduct different writing courses in the undergraduate level of the respective university. The names of the students, teachers, and the name of the institution have been kept anonymous in consideration of research ethics.

We have selected some writing samples of students, namely paragraphs, business letters, and letters of application submitted to us as academic requirements. We have given the students enough scope to write these pieces with full concentration and in a cool brain.

The selected students are either in their 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th year of 4 years

Bachelor program in English Language and Literature. The eligibility criteria of students' entry-level require at least a 6.00 GPA, taking the scores of SSC and HSC together but not below 2.5 at any level. Therefore, the academic merit of the average students can be regarded as of the middle range. However, it is important to note that the students have already had 12 years of the learning experience of English as a compulsory subject from the primary to higher secondary levels of their schooling.

3.1. Data collection and presentation

In order to ensure an acceptable representation of students, the study considers male and female students from 2nd to 8th semesters at the undergraduate level. The students who are in 2nd semester are doing their 1st writing course titled **Basic Writing,** the contents of which include different kinds of paragraphs, namely narrative, descriptive, and expository; writing personal and official letters, amplification, dialogue, and précis writing, and developing free and guided essays. The students who are in 3rd semesters have completed one writing course in the 2nd semester and are doing their 2nd writing course entitled **Advanced Writing,** the contents of which include freewriting, creative writing, writing opening sentences, exchanging letters, giving directions, jigsaw story writing, writing letters of invitation, graph/table reading, writing simple instructions, writing journalistic report and article, writing composition showing comparison and contrast and arguments and writing essays about literature. The students who are in the 6th semester have completed one writing courses and doing their 3rd writing course titled **Business Writing,** the contents of which contain writing letters for promoting sales, claim and adjustment, credit, and collection, circular, enquiry, order, writing tenders and advertisement, memorandum, notices, agenda and minutes, e-mail, job application; and CV and report writing. The students who are in the 7th and 8th semesters have completed all the writing courses mentioned above.

Three types of writing samples, namely paragraph, letter of application, and business letters, have been used as the sources of data. Five categories of paragraphs have been taken from 25 female students of 2nd semester divided into five groups, eight samples of business letters have been collected from 8 groups of male students, and letters of application have been taken from 27 female students with acceptable representation from 3rd, 6th, 7th and 8th semesters. In the case of writing paragraphs, we have been able to divide mistakes and errors according to Corder's (1967) guideline of differentiating errors and mistakes. After their submission of the paragraphs, the researchers asked them to correct their mistakes to differentiate the errors

and mistakes. What has been corrected by them has been considered as mistakes. After their correction, the errors identified by the researchers have been considered errors. Moreover, the errors that have been repeatedly made have also been considered as *errors*.

4. Discussion and findings

Twenty-eight samples of five categories of paragraphs have been collected from 5 groups of 2nd-semester students. Each group consists of 5 students. After submission of these paragraphs, we asked the students to identify the mistakes in their writings by themselves. We have termed the lapses corrected by them as *mistakes*. The mistakes that have been identified on the basis of students' correction are: pluralization problem, spelling mistakes, missing connectors, inappropriate use of words, e.g., use of *cultivate* instead of *plant,* determiner-noun disagreement, missing of the definite article before the superlative adjective, and the like. It has been observed that spelling mistakes are the highest in number, i.e., five groups made the mistakes. Pluralization problems identified in three groups' writings are of three different types, i.e., a group has written an adjective (separate) using plural marker *s*, another group has not pluralized a noun with its plural marker, and the other group has not turned a noun into its plural form after *one of*.

However, the mistakes that the students could correct have been presented as mistakes; and those which they could not correct have been presented as errors in the samples of paragraph writing. In the case of other writing samples, i.e., business letters and letters of application, we have identified *errors* on the basis of repetition of the same mistakes more than once. Including all writing samples, we see that students have made errors at 16 levels, as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Errors in no. and percentage

No. of errors	Types of errors	No. of participants' errors	Percentage of errors
1.	Improper use or missing of punctuation mark	24	40%
2.	Misplacement of preposition	18	30%
3.	Subject-verb disagreement	15	25%
4.	Determiner-noun disagreement	15	25%
5.	Spelling problem	11	18.33%
6.	Improper pluralization or avoidan ce of pluralization	11	18.33%
7.	Misuse of apostrophe	7	11.66%
8.	Capitalization problems	4	6.66%
9.	Wrong use of linkers	3	5%
10.	Wrong use of modals	3	5%
11.	Wrong use of tense	3	5%
12.	Wrong use of passive structure	3	5%
13.	Wrong use of articles	2	3.33%
14.	Wrong use of pronoun	2	3.33%
15.	Improper salutation	2	3.33%
16.	Wrong use of adverb	1	1.66%

Table 1 shows that errors committed in the use of punctuation marks are at the top of students' errors, i.e., 40%; misplacement of preposition scores the second-highest, i.e., 30%; subject-verb disagreement and determiner-noun disagreement are 25% each; spelling problem and improper pluralization or avoidance of pluralization each shows 11% of errors; 11.66% errors are observed in the use of apostrophe; capitalization problem is 6.66%; wrong use of linkers, wrong use of modals, wrong use of tense and wrong use of passive structure each shows 3% of errors; 3.33% of errors are perceived in each of wrong use of articles, wrong use of pronoun and the use of improper salutation, and wrong use of adverb scores the lowest, i.e., 1.66%. Though many other errors have been detected, here we have highlighted those mistakes and errors that regularly and habitually occur most in the corpora of our students' written production.

It has been observed that punctuation errors are mostly found in the use of the comma. We also observe that students tend to put a comma after the subordinator *that*. This is apparently because of Li interference, i.e., in Bangla comma is used after the subordinator **je** (যে). Students also tend to avoid comma after the salutation in writing the letters of application. In the use of prepositions, we have observed that the students use prepositions regardless of whether the verb is transitive or intransitive. They are likely to write *attend in the class,* for example, and the opposite picture is also observed, i.e., missing of preposition where it is required. Students also tend to use plural verbs with singular subjects and singular verbs with plural subjects. The same tendency is also observed in the use of determiners and nouns, i.e., singular determiner with plural nouns and plural determiner with singular nouns. The students also have a tendency to use apostrophes before the plural marker *s*. Though the rules of capitalization are quite familiar to the students, they still use upper case letters in the midst of sentences on the one hand and lower case letters at the beginning of sentences on the other.

4.1. Factors contributing to the mistakes and errors

At the tertiary level, students are pretty mature, and they have already studied English for more than 12 years. In order to know the factors responsible for the mistakes and errors still they make, we have conducted an open-ended questionnaire survey of 8 male and female university English teachers who teach the writing courses at the undergraduate level in the university wherein we have conducted our study. The factors that have been perceived by them are:

a. Defective system of education previously pursued by the students;
b. Lack of logistic supports necessary for a successful class;

c. Degenerating socio-economic and ethical condition of Bangladesh;
d. Students' lack of knowledge and practice;
e. Lack of appropriate teaching method and students' insufficient attention in learning;
f. Due to students' lack of proficiency in English;
g. Lack of stress in learning English during students' school life;
h. Lack of consistency in learning English;
i. Lack of insight into grammatical rules;
j. The carelessness of students in their writings;
k. Lack of revision after writing;
l. Lack of students' confidence and
m. Their fossilization.

Moreover, from the study of students' writing samples, we observe spelling errors occur in the case of some different but similar-sounding confusing words. For example, students face difficulties in differentiating between *sometime* and *sometimes*. So they are likely to write one for another. Overgeneralization is also liable for spelling errors. For instance, they write *greatful* instead of *grateful,* thinking the word has derived from *great.*

5. Recommendations and pedagogical implications

The teachers' opinions in the questionnaire survey also recommend some remedies to avoid the errors and mistakes the students make. Thus, the potential recommendations perceived by them are: students' concentration on teachers' lectures; their regular practice of writing on social media like Facebook; reading good books, journals, English newspapers, and any good writing of any form; having proper knowledge of relevant items; individual feedback; participating in interactive learning; having a clear knowledge of grammatical rules and being persuasive towards their usage; the seriousness of students in their learning, and being curious for learning, and revision after writing. As far as our observation goes, writing as a productive skill is difficult to learn for the students. So, they are reluctant to practice it as a discipline. But, remedies lie in its large scale practice.

On top of the learning scenario, the overall reality of the teaching scenario of writing in Bangladesh, too, has been taken into consideration. It has been observed that from the very primary level, students are not taught writing properly. They are given some selected essays and paragraphs to memorize for examinations instead of learning to write essays and paragraphs by themselves. This practice at schools and colleges damages the students' creativity in the bud. Moreover, students are hardly appreciated and

motivated when they try to write something independently. The same scenario is also present at the tertiary level. Teachers' training for effective teaching of writing is also absent here. As a result, students don't feel interested in the writing courses.

The above scenario in Bangladesh clearly leaves a thought-provoking concern to the English language teachers at the tertiary level, and further concern to the teachers of primary and secondary levels as well. Therefore, this study addresses the following concerns to the forums of teachers, particularly those dealing with writing courses, and draws the attention of the governing bodies.

 a. The teachers should apply strategies to draw the attention of students.
 b. Syllabus design and materials development for writing courses should be planned in such a way that the students will feel motivated to do the courses.
 c. The necessary logistic supports should be ensured for effective learning and teaching.
 d. The teachers should be trained for teaching writing effectively.

6. Conclusion

Writing is regarded as the most important skill at all levels of teaching and should be treated with equal importance. If we take the mistakes of graduating students into careful consideration, to bring changes in the existing teaching system of writing seems essential now. Effective training for the learners in the learning process is also necessary for their writing to improve adequately. On the basis of the observations, and the findings of the present study, it may be concluded that a lot of work has to be done to make the situations of English language teaching-learning in Bangladesh motivating. In this case, the issue of teaching methodology is the prime concern of this study.

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