

Identifying Grammatical Errors in English Academic Writing Tasks of Undergraduate Engineering Students at DUET in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify and analyze grammatical and organizational errors in the writing tasks of undergraduate engineering students at Dhaka University of Engineering and Technology (DUET). To assemble data, the researcher has employed two qualitative data collection tools respectively document analysis and semi structured interviews of teachers and students. The study utilized purposive sampling to select participants. Documents were collected from 200 students of 04 (four) departments of Dhaka University of Engineering and Technology. Then, 6 English teachers from Dhaka University of Engineering and Technology and 20 students out of 200 previously participated in document writing were selected for semi-structured interviews. Documents were analyzed using descriptive analysis method and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis method. The findings of the study reveal that students commonly commit errors in verb forms, sentence structure and prepositions. The researcher recommends that teachers focus on addressing common errors, motivating students, using contrastive analysis techniques, providing formative feedback and clear explanations of grammatical errors, incorporating collaborative learning strategies and promoting students' active engagement in the classroom to develop their writing skill.

Keywords: Writing, Error, Intralingual, Interlingual, collaborative

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is considered the most challenging task among four language skills in the context of English as foreign language or English as second language [1] because it is a creative activity and demands to have complete understanding of all the mechanics, aspects, grammar and organization of the language [2]. EFL learners make errors in the academic writing tasks due to the structural and cultural difference between their mother tongue and the target language and it is very complex since they have challenges in forming ideas, grammar and mechanics [3]. The other challenges include learners' insufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, inadequate application of grammar, lack of motivation and scarcity of creative writing [4, 5]. At the primary and secondary stages of their learning, students from Bangla medium are used to writing academic tasks through memorizing from some particular books. Therefore, learners do not get chance to practice academic writing creatively and consequently they do not develop effective writing skill even after 12 years of schooling and learning English as a major subject.

Proficiency in academic writing at tertiary level is indispensable to understand disciplinary knowledge and

to establish in career [6]. Besides, learners need to express their ideas, requirements and thoughts formally to their teachers, peers and employers in English. To that end, they are required to write email, report, proposals, applications, letters, resumes, cover letters, memos, and dissertation [2]. Moreover, learners encounter all academic writing assessments in English, as it is the medium of instruction at the tertiary level. Therefore, to achieve good grades in academic life and succeed in careers, learners must develop strong skills in English writing.

Although mastering academic writing is essential, undergraduate engineering students at Dhaka University of Engineering and Technology (DUET) seem to struggle with this skill. Learners tend to make errors when attempting to convey their ideas in English academic writing tasks, such as, essay writing, summary writing, paragraph writing, assignment and lab reports, etc. It is also experienced that students from engineering program are unable to explain their arguments properly since they are inefficient in English language. English writing skill is vital for engineers to convey ideas logically. Identifying and analyzing the errors of learners' speech or writing have been a pivotal part of language pedagogy for long days to find out the ways of improvement. Error analysis

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is a teaching strategy to provide students guidelines for correction. In order to support students and provide corrective feedback, this study has been attempted to identify the errors in the writing tasks of learners at DUET. Most of the existing research on academic writing errors predominantly identified the errors committed by students from general universities. There is a scarcity of studies focusing on the problem faced by engineering students. Therefore, this study will be facilitating for students, teachers and researchers in the field of English language teaching and learning.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Academic writing encompasses any formal written work created by students within an academic environment [7]. At the university level, mastering English academic writing skill is crucial to English as a foreign language learners or English as a Second language learners. As a related subject, undergraduate engineering students in Bangladesh generally practice English academic writing skill through writing assignments, project report, lab report, essay, paragraph, dissertation and answer script since English is the medium of instruction. English academic writing skill is an important aspect of learning English language at the tertiary level to make students successful in their academic life as well as to ensure their future career. Writing is a life-long learning skill since it is a medium of communication in the academic discourse community. Moreover, learners face their proficiency test in English academic writing skills in almost all the tertiary academic program [1].

Though English academic writing skill is necessary to achieve good grade in the academic result, to demonstrate knowledge at any fields of learning and to compete in any international tests or to make good career, undergraduate engineering learners at DUET encounter challenges in academic writings. They struggle to produce any piece of academic writings without errors. Among multifaceted problems, the central one is the influence of mother tongue in the structure of sentences. Other problems entail the incorrect use or omission of the use of verb tense, preposition, subject-verb agreement, articles, incorrect organization of sentences, passive sentence, and parallel structure of the sentence. In this regard, [8] said that grammatical errors in English may occur in incorrect noun phrase construction, improper use of auxiliary verbs, errors in verb phrases, misspellings, and misuse of tenses, all of which result from a lack of understanding of the target language.

In the process of learning English as a foreign or second language, making errors or mistakes is natural or common because human beings learn through errors and trial [9]. Errors and mistakes are common occurrences in the written work of students at the tertiary level. Nonetheless, errors and mistakes are two separate things. “Mistake” is defined as a performance error which students make due to the failure of following a known system accurately [10]. Alternatively, an error indicates that the language user is unfamiliar with the grammatical rule. Mistakes can be corrected by the language user but error cannot be corrected by the language user. Therefore, error means the ignorance of the rules which cannot be corrected by learner himself.

The source of errors and mistakes are two types:

i) Interlingual errors

It is the effect of mother language influence upon the target language learning at the earlier stage. Every learner remains preoccupied with the solo linguistic system of [10] his or her mother tongue before learning the target language system. The influence of learner’s mother tongue is reflected in three major areas: the use of grammar, preposition and lexicon(words).

ii) Intralingual errors

These errors typically arise due to misunderstandings or incomplete knowledge of the target language’s rules. Intralingual errors can include mistakes such as overgeneralization, misapplication of grammatical rules, or confusion with irregular forms. For instance: the learners cannot use the rule of third-person singular marker in a sentence of the target language because of overgeneralization [11].

To develop learners’ skill in academic writing, identifying and analyzing errors are the integral part of teaching and learning a language [12]. Therefore, teachers are required to identify and analyze errors from the answer script of learners. Then, evaluate error taxonomy. Students commit different types of linguistic errors. Linguistics have classified these errors on the basis of language category, such as, syntax, morphology, semantics and lexicon or vocabulary. Morphological errors can occur due to omission, addition, or misformation, while syntactical errors may arise from omission, addition, or disordering [13]. In short, morphology and syntax are important to make grammatically accurate composition.

Accordingly, errors analysis helps both learners and teachers to be conscious of the deficiencies of writing. Teachers cannot identify learners' patterns of problems in applying the rules of the target language without assessing their writing samples. Likewise, students cannot recognize their own errors in the stages of his development without reflection or feedback. Consequently, through error analysis, teachers can provide appropriate feedback according to the needs of the learners and select the appropriate teaching strategies to develop the level of learners' writing proficiency. There are three types of writing approach in the field of English language teaching. First one is process approach which is the most recent used teaching approach since 1980s [14]. In this procedure, learners practice writing skill through pre-writing, drafting, editing, revising and publishing. Here, teachers perform as the facilitators. This is a student-centered approach. Learners are exposed to creative and dynamic writing through academic report, essay, paragraph and assignment writing. Another approach is product-based approach. This approach is teacher dominated approach. Here, teachers are the provider of knowledge. The third approach is collaborative writing approach. Here, students perform in group with their peers through sharing and discussing. This approach is beneficial as it promotes learners to employ their critical thinking skills, self-reflection and ideas sharing capacity [15].

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses the following research questions:

- a) What types of grammatical and organizational errors do learners make in their English academic writing tasks?
- b) What are the perceptions of the teachers and learners regarding the reasons for making grammatical errors in English academic writing tasks?
- c) What are the possible solutions to the errors learners make in their English academic writing tasks?

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study investigated the different types of grammatical errors in the academic writing tasks of undergraduate learners at DUET. Further, it explores the views of teachers and learners regarding the reasons behind committing grammatical errors in the writing tasks. Based on the nature of the problem of the current study, a qualitative method has been adopted for the study. It helps to obtain in depth understanding of the research problem.

4.1 Population and Sample

To conduct the investigation thoroughly, the current study selected scripts of 200 students from 04 departments of Dhaka University of Engineering and Technology, Gazipur-1707. Later, 6 teachers (who are teaching English at Dhaka University of Engineering and Technology, Gazipur-1707) and 20 students out of 200 students participated in the semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling method was employed to select participants for the present study. The purposive sampling method, a type of non-probability sampling is employed to get sufficient information from the necessary target audience [16]. Since, the study explores the problems of undergraduate students of DUET, participants who were involved with the phenomenon of the problem were chosen.

4.2 Research Instruments for Data Collection

To investigate the problem, the study employed document analysis and semi-structured interviews as research instruments to collect qualitative data. To collect document for grammatical errors in the academic writing, an essay writing test was conducted with 200 students. To ensure the validity of the test, a pilot test was administered with 20 students earlier. The essay writing test included three topics out of which students could choose one.

- a) Artificial Intelligence for Learning Purpose
- b) Corruption in Bangladesh
- c) Cultural Intrusion in Bangladesh: Its Causes and Effect

To determine the validity of the teachers and students' semi-structured interview based on guided questions, a pilot test was administered upon two teachers and a group of students before starting to conduct the actual semi-structured interview. To establish the reliability of the present research, a triangulation was made between two responses elicited from the same person in reply to the same questions at two different times. All the participants took part in the test and interviews willingly and voluntarily.

4.3 Data Analysis Techniques

After collecting the scripts of learners, writing task of every learner was assessed and errors were identified. Then, errors were categorized and possible source of each error is described in the table. Each error was recorded only once. Finally, the data found from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis method and presented in text. To achieve the validity of the findings, data obtained from both teachers and students as well as from scripts were triangulated at the end.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Findings from Document Analysis

This paper analyzes the most common grammatical and organizational errors at the sentence level students committed in English academic writing task. Afterwards, the researchers followed the five steps provided by Corder (1975) [17] for identifying errors and conducting error analysis from sample writing scripts. They are as:

- i) Gathering a sample made by the learner
- ii) Identifying errors from the sample
- iii) Giving the description of errors
- iv) Providing the analysis of errors
- v) Assessing the errors

To that end, the researcher has collected 200 scripts on essay writing from students as sample. Then, through checking every script, most common errors were identified and categorized to syntactical and morphological category. Later, the possible source of every error was stated as interlingual error and intralingual error. Example of every error type was also illustrated beside error category in the table below. Finally, analysis and evaluation of every error has been given with table and in text below.

Table I: Examples of Grammatical Errors Found in Verb Forms from Students' Script

Syntactic Category (Syntax)	Example of Learners' Error	Possible source of Error
i) Main verb missing	Artificial intelligence leading a big role on learning purpose.	Intralingual
ii) Missing infinitive	It saves many times of teachers of teachers.	Intralingual
ii) using "ed" with infinitive	Easy to prepared their class materials.	Intralingual
iv) missing gerund	It is digital way of learn.	Intralingual
v) Unnecessary gerund	Everybody take a action to removing corruption.	Intralingual
vi) Forget to use "s/es" after 3rd person singular number in present tense	Corruption hinder social development is a very way.	Intralingual
vii) Subject-verb agreement	Healthcare and public service are do not give services for people.	Interlingual

The study of table I reveals some prevalent grammatical errors of students in the academic writing. The common errors have been identified in the verb form as missing main verb, missing infinitive or using "ed" with infinitive, missing gerund or using unnecessary gerund, forgetting to use "s/es" after 3rd person singular number in present tense and subject-verb agreement related problems. The most frequent errors are intralingual due to internalization of grammatical rules and misunderstanding of these rules as well as their insufficient practice.

Table II: Examples of Grammatical Errors Found in Prepositions and Article from Students' Script

Syntactic Category (Syntax)	Example of Learners' Errors	Possible Source of Error
i) Misuse of preposition	In the heath care sector also corrupted in Bangladesh.	Intralingual/ Interlingual
ii) Omission of preposition	It is happed hospitals also in a corrupted.	Intralingual/ Interlingual
iii) Misuse of article "a/an"	A Admission test in the home for the using AI.	Intralingual/ Interlingual

The second most common errors are found in the answer scripts identified as misuse of preposition, omission of preposition and misuse of article a and an (as in table II). These errors can be attributed to both intralingual and interlingual errors. Intralingual errors occur due to internalization of grammatical rules and their lack of application. On the other hand, interlingual errors are made because of the influence of learners' native language.

Table III: Examples of Grammatical Errors Found in Voice Construction and Parallelism from Students' Script

Syntactical Category (Syntax)	Example of Learners' Errors	Possible Source of Error
i) Problem with formation of active and passive sentences	i) A good country made with a good people. Government employer ii) So, we are learnt by the work hard artificial intelligence.	Intralingual

Syntactical Category (Syntax)	Example of Learners' Errors	Possible Source of Error
ii) Missing of past participle form of verb in passive structure	Many student are depends fully of artificial intelligence which is impect their letant telant.	Intralingual
iii) Problem with parallelism / similarity of the structure	Our law must be strong and ensure it is followed everywhere.	Intralingual
iv) Wrong structure of sentence	All of the people together with and hinders corruption. Student use is for cheating in the exam also.	Interlingual

Table III displays the errors found in the answer scripts of students related to forming active and passive voice and the problem of parallel construction. From the analysis of errors, it appears that most of the errors made by the students are intralingual. This type of error is occurred due to the negative transfer of target language grammatical rules. This also happens because of insufficient practice of target language grammatical rules.

5.2 Findings from Semi-structured Interview

The data accumulated from semi-structured interview were organized and interpreted to find out the themes. The themes emerged from analyzing the responses and opinions of teachers and students have been presented below along with discussion. For the convenience of discussion, the themes are divided into different categories:

a) Motivation to Develop Writing Skill

Students express their desire to improve their writing but they face challenges due to limited English proficiency and lack of practice. Most of the students said that they felt interest to develop writing skill. Student-1 told,

“Yes, I feel. As I am a diploma holder student. There are too much lack of English Knowledge. Lack of practice, my varsity classes are being effected.” Student- 2 added, “I feel always when I am writing English I weak in English knowledge. So, I feel interest to improve my English writing skill.”

On the contrary, teachers have different opinions. Teachers opined that students did not have motivation. In

this regard, teacher-2 said, “they mostly lack motivation because they are scared and they think they will somehow be able to get done without improving their writing skills.” Teacher-2 thought, “I should say, to a great extent, my students lack motivation to develop writing skill. Actually, there was a lack of exposure to English in their SSC and Diploma level. So, they face several problems while producing their own writing. Hence, they do not want to write.”

b) Making Grammatical and Organizational Errors During Writing

Both students and teachers acknowledge frequent grammatical and organizational errors in students' writing. Students accepted that they made grammatical and organizational errors in their writing. Student-3 said, “the main errors are grammar and vocabulary. I have not much knowledge about vocabulary. There are many words, which English meaning is unknown to me. So, when I want to write something, I cannot remember the actual English word that creates problems. Grammar mistake also a big issue.”

Again, teachers also held that student had huge grammatical and organizational errors. Teacher-4 found, “students make errors in using preposition, article, adjective, noun, adverb, verb, infinitive, gerund, voice. They also have problem in making structure of sentence and organizing ideas.”

c) Providing Feedback on Grammatical Errors in the Class

Students appreciate the feedback teachers provide on their writing. They think that it is necessary for their improvement. Students mostly agreed that their teachers provide them feedbacks on grammatical errors. They provide full feedback on our mistake. Student-8 said, “yes, I always try to receive teachers feedback and apply to correct my mistakes.”

In this context, teachers also gave similar views. Teacher- 4 confirmed, “yes, sometimes. It helps them to improve writing. They can proofread their writing next time. It makes them autonomous to correct the writing mistakes.”

d) Using Free Writing for Individual or Group Work

Some students said that they practiced free writing individually in the class. On the other hand, some students said that they practiced both individually and in group. Student-12 said, “In academic sessional class, we practice freehand writing individually and group.” Student-13

added, “yes we practice it individually. But I just want do this regularly. I need pressure. That’s why in all the semester English should be included.”

Teachers also illustrated that they mostly used individual work to practice writing. Teacher-5 added, “yes I do. I give students classwork and assignments. I prefer to give individual writing tasks.”

e) Reasons Behind Making Errors in the Writing Task

Students have the honest acceptance that they memorize the topic to write in the script. They do not try or think to apply grammatical or ideas themselves before writing any materials. Student-13 said, “When I write in the script, I am afraid of writing. I think I weak in grammar. I think how to write correct in script. I memorize it to solve.”

Teachers have identified multiple reasons behind writing problems. One of the major problems is memorizing the topics to write in the script. Teacher-1 said, “They focus only on grammar and do not focus on application. They are also careless since they lack interest. Besides, they also have tendency to memorize. Their polytechnic background has impact on their performance, too”.

6. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Based on the analysis of document and semi-structured interview, valuable insights have been found about the grammatical challenges encountered by students in academic writing. Students mostly committed intralingual errors which were the causes of internalization of English grammatical rules by the learners and their incomplete grammatical knowledge as well as insufficient application of these rules. Especially, students made errors in using main verbs, third person singular number, passive voice structure and omitting preposition. These occur due to applying native language structures or misunderstanding English grammar rules. On the basis of the findings, this study recommends:

- i. Teachers should focus on teaching more grammar instruction where students make common mistakes, such as main verb usage, third person singular agreement, passive voice structures, sentence organization and prepositions.
- ii. Students’ motivation should be increased to boost their writing skill.
- iii. To overcome the challenges related to idea generation and organization, more group works and collaborative works can be incorporated in the classrooms.

- iv. To reduce memorizing tendency of the students, they should be encouraged to summarize, paraphrase and engage in free writing to promote critical thinking and application.
- v. Teachers should incorporate activities that compare and contrast English grammar with students’ native languages to help them understand differences. In this way, learners will try to avoid interlingual errors in writing.
- vi. Learners should be encouraged to practice exercises and writing tasks regularly to reinforce their understanding and proper application of grammar rules.
- vii. Learners should be promoted to use grammar reference books, online tools, and interactive platforms to find explanations and exercises to common student errors.
- viii. Teachers should provide continuous formative feedback and clear explanations on learners’ grammatical errors in writing tasks to help them develop self-correction skills and internalize grammar rules.
- ix. Teachers should receive professional training to develop effective strategies for identifying and addressing both intralingual and interlingual errors in writing instruction.

7. CONCLUSION

The study intended to explore the significant grammatical and organizational challenges faced by undergraduate engineering students at Dhaka University of Engineering and Technology (DUET) in academic writing. In the light of the findings of the study, it might be mentioned that teachers should emphasize on teaching areas where students commonly make errors, i.e. verb forms, sentence structure and prepositions. To minimize interlingual errors, teachers should apply contrastive analysis technique in teaching grammar in the classroom. Students’ motivation must be increased through engaging them in creative writing like free writing by summarizing or paraphrasing ideas from a sample. Students may be inspired to demonstrate their practical application in writing. Incorporating group work and collaborative learning can mitigate the challenges related to ideas generation and sentence organization. Students must be encouraged to be active learner to develop critical thinking and deeper understanding of the material which will assist to overcome the problem of memorizing. Integrating these strategies into the curriculum at the tertiary level will prepare students to excel in academic writing and enhance their professional communication skills within the engineering sector.

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APPENDIX-1

Teacher Questionnaire for Semi-structured Interviews

Dear sir/ madam

Assalamualaikum, hopefully, you are fine. I would like to invite you to participate in an interview discussion for the purpose of research. Your generous help and opinions are expected in this research. Please feel free to respond to some questions and give your valuable suggestions. Your participation and sincere response will give directions to realistic and feasible solutions to a problem. Responses given by you will be kept anonymous and confidential. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

With regards

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Section -A: Personal Information

First, provide some personal information about yourself for the sake of the study.

1. Your email:
2. Years of teaching experience:
3. Your academic qualification
4. Academic Area in which you are an expert in
 - i. English Language Teaching (ELT)
 - ii. English Literature
 - iii. Both

Section-B: Please provide your valuable opinions on the following queries

1. What types of grammatical errors do you find in the answer script of your students? Please mention.
2. What organizational errors do your learners make at the sentence level in their academic writing tasks? Please specify.
3. Do you provide feedbacks to students after finding errors? Do you think your feedback help to improve students' writing? How?
4. What is your perception regarding the reasons behind making errors in the academic writing tasks of engineering undergraduate learners at DUET?
5. Do you think your students memorize the topics to write in the script?
6. Do you use free writing tasks for individual or group work in the class
7. To what extent do you think your students lack motivation to develop their writing skill? Why?
8. Does your feedback make your students autonomous to correct the writing mistakes?

Thank you very much.

APPENDIX-2

Questions for Semi-Structured Interview with Students

Time of Interview: 30 minutes

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Name of Student:

Level of Study:

Name of the University (Interviewee studying at):

Hello student!

How are you? I would like to invite you to participate in an interview discussion and information provided by you will be kept confidential. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. Do you feel interest to improve your English writing?
2. Do you make grammatical and sentence organizational errors in your writing?
3. Can you identify errors in your writing? If do, then what types of errors are these? Specify.
4. Does your teacher provide feedback on your grammatical and organizational errors in the writing?
5. Do you correct your mistakes after getting teachers' feedback?
6. Do you memorize the materials to write in the script?
7. Do you practice English writing at home?
8. Do you practice free writing individually or in group in the class?

Thank you very much!