GRAMMATICAL LAPSES AMONG THE FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADS IN BANGLADESH: CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The study tends to depict the grammatical lapses in academic English committed by the undergrads at a private university in Bangladesh. The study seeks for the frequent errors and mistakes learners make in academic writing which has been collected from the teaching experiences gained through the teaching of 'Foundation English' to the first year undergrads. Data was collected from examining exam scripts and from classroom practices. The focus of analyzing errors and mistakes is given on whether first year university learners can write English according to the timely actions of the subject (tense), whether they can write correct verbs according to the number of subjects (subject verb agreement) and also whether they can use the active and passive sense in proper place while writing. Writing being a procedure to learn, to be successful in this process of writing learners require to produce grammatically correct sentences that pave the way of exposing speaking which is too timely for private university students in the current context of Bangladesh. Being English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners, it is the basis to learn grammar to persist their learning 'writing' in advanced level. Also, it hopes to make teachers aware about their classroom pedagogy and learner about classroom learning by gaining language proficiency and by overcoming their errors and mistakes in writing in their EFL classroom.

Keywords: *First year undergrads, errors, mistakes, English language, classroom*

1. Introduction

In Bangladesh, learners learn English from their very early stage of education. After completing three phases like primary level (one to five), secondary level (six to 10), higher secondary level (11 to 12), learners embrace higher education by getting admitted into universities. Private universities are those places where learners also get their higher education besides public universities and colleges under national universities. Giving priority to writing skill is not a new idea in pedagogy rather it is more emphasized than reading, speaking and listening in Bangladesh. Though writing and reading skills are more offered to learners in our education system, having good command over writing is difficult to expect from all level of learners. In today's communicative approach, it requires interactions between learners and teachers to teach and learn four skills of language.

On the other side, in linguistic approach of teaching, writing is given emphasis and accuracy is strictly followed. In connection with this what Chomsky's (1965) view on linguistic theory is "the abstract abilities speakers possess that enable learners to produce grammatically correct sentences in a language" (Richard & Rodgers, 1986: 159). According to Chomsky (1965) cited in Richard & Rodgers (1986: 159), "Linguistic theory is concerned with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is

unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions". Chomsky's (1965) view of competence in language offers abstract grammatical knowledge according to the linguistic theory.

Sentence correction is the prerequisite of writing. Without knowing the basic rules of grammar, it is impossible to write in any language though without learning grammar, it is possible to speak through learning from environment.

Nunan (2003:154) talked that sentences will be acceptable if they follow the rules set out by the grammar of the language by illustrating an example that a subject followed by a verb followed by an object is grammatical. According to him "The big dog moan the" is ungrammatical because of violating the rules.

However, In our mainstream education system, learner's writings are assessed through setting various examinations. So very little they can know about their mistakes and errors in writing except knowing the marks only. Before undergraduate level, there is a little scope for assessing learners writing within classroom and through proper feedback. Therefore, here it is crucial to investigate academic writing errors and mistakes by assessing class works and exam scripts too.

2. Objectives

As the grammatical accuracy lays the foundation of accurate writing, the present paper aims at finding out the frequent lapses learners commit while using right form of verbs according to timely actions, verbs according to number of subject and verbs according to active and passive voices while writing English. It also tends to define the mistakes and errors and distinguish between them in academic writings and foster the teachers to emphasize on giving proper feedback in the language classroom in Bangladesh.

3. Literature Review

After studying relevant literature it is found very few researches on Bangladeshi first years undergrads which instigate researchers to do this research. Though, error analysis for searching lapses in learner's writing and speaking, has been conducted by different researchers from Bangladesh. But the rationale behind this study is to analyze those frequent mistakes and errors learners are seen common in writing.

Muslim (2011:48-49) emphasizes that grammatical accuracy acts as a springboard to gaining language proficiency. The dichotomy between mistakes and errors marginalize the wrong doings in writing. The mistakes in academic writing which they do usually hamper their academic writing even though correct writing is not only related to grammatical accuracy like using correct verbs, sub-verb agreement etc. but also related to choice of diction, coherence etc. To say about this, Khan and Akter (2011) said in their study that compared to other skills, writing is more demanding in terms of such factors as grammatical accuracy, mechanics, diction, coherence, etc. Though, mistakes are human natural instinct in their behavior also, it is easy to overcome in writing if learners are conscious about it. Errors occur for carelessness, momentary slip of tongue or momentary lapse of thought. Many researchers have analyzed and investigated the errors and mistakes of individual skills of learner's second language also they have given vivid boundary between errors and mistakes. Errors are noteworthy to the teacher, researcher, and learner. Errors enable the teacher to follow the learners' progress in the language (Corder, 1974), also cited in Tarawneh & Almomani (2013).

Error analysis is the best tool to describe grammatical lapses committed by learners of other languages (Johansan 1975, cited in Jayasundara & Premarathna, 2011). Here, in this study a detailed analysis of error and mistakes has been shown on the basis of collecting data on the performance of writing through focusing on tense, sub-verb-agreement and active-passive sense.

.Corder (1967, 1971 & 1974) cited in Jabeen, Kazemian & Mustafai (2015) classifies the errors into four different categories- addition, omission, selection and ordering. Khan & Akter (2011) in their studies divided mistakes and errors into the few categories: use of words, tense, number, preposition, missing words, subject-verb agreement, article, coherence etc. and found out total mistakes in tense, sub-verb agreement are respectively 187 and 97. Sayeed (2016) conducted

a research on Bangla and English medium school students to observe the errors in sentence construction, subject- verb agreement, article, verb, preposition, tense, spelling error. But the present study does not investigate the reasons behind inaccuracy of sentences rather it analyzes those lapses learners do commit on regular basis. To analyze, in this paper grammatical feature like correct use of verbs, subject verb agreement and sense of voice have been considered. Regarding this, Ali (2011) showed in his study the way in which the Bangladeshi ELT practitioners view their students' errors and the ways they correct the errors. After reviewing different relevant literature it is found that researchers have conducted researches on errors and mistakes analysis but specific lapse done in English language by the undergraduates have yet to be more explored. This analytical approach will help syllabus designers, material improvers as well as language practitioners to develop their materials while teaching also.

4. Methodology

The study has been conducted through collecting real life examples of writing by the learners taken from classroom pedagogy conducted in the classroom and also by examining final exam scripts. 30 undergraduate students were asked to write the correct form of verbs according to tense and subject-verb agreement. Among those students final exam scripts were also used for data collection. It was analytical and descriptive in nature through the collaboration of various ungrammatical error and mistaken sentences done by the undergraduates of a private university in Dhaka city. Besides, it tries to differentiate which are mistakes and which are errors. As here the researcher and the teacher is the same person, it was not difficult for the researcher to decide where the mistakes and errors occurred. Here the course instructor, the teacher was teaching English to the same learners all through four months that made the researcher interested to analyze the frequent types of mistakes and errors learners do in common. The errors have been shown through analyzing and investigating and mistakes have shown in comparison with the errors in writing both from classroom and from exam papers too. After describing, their ungrammatical production of sentences, suggestion has been provided whether to give them feedback or not.

5. Findings and Discussion

Classroom pedagogy has changed from the rules-based teaching to example-based teaching. To find out the data classroom practices and exam scripts were determined and analyzed to explain the lapses the students usually make.

5.1. Case Study-01: Right form of verbs

Whenever they were asked to fill in the gaps with present tense verb in the classroom, the answers were like this:

Example-1

Usually, I _____ (wake) up early in the morning then I _____ (go) for my morning walk. After coming back I _____ (take) breakfast at 8.00 am and _____ (start) my journey for my university. In my office, I ____ (do) 'my each and every work properly and at 5.00 pm I _____ (come) back from my university and again_____ (sit) for studies.

Answers: wake, go, take, start, do, come, sit

Students' response: Most of the students answered in the same way as they were directed to keep the base form of verbs in usual activities that were given already inside the brackets.

But the performance totally changed for many of students when the subject had been changed from 'I' to 'my father' in the mid of the passage.

Example-2

Every day I _____ (wake) up late in the morning. Then I cannot_____ (go) for morning walk. Likewise, my father ____ (get) up early in the morning and_____ (walk) 1 km every day. After coming back, he _____ (take) his breakfast at 8.00 am and _____ (start) his journey for his office. In, his office, I sometimes____ (visit) with him and I _____ (come) back when he_____ (complete) his work and we _____ (return) together at home.

Answers: Wake, go, gets, walks, takes, starts, visit, come, completes, return

Students' response: In response to this fill in the blanks students are found to keep the base form of verbs as they were directed to keep the base form of verbs in present indefinite tense. 60% students were correct in writing verbs as the base forms were given. But other 40% students were found not to use 's' or 'es' morpheme when subject became from 'I' to 'my father'. Even though, it is difficult to decide whether this number of students is doing mistakes or errors. But when in the 3rd exercise, students from almost same portion did the same mistakes then the researcher decided that it was lack of their grammatical competency not just for ignorance.

Example-3

My grandfather_____ (wake) up at yesterday at 5 am then he_____ (offer) his prayer as he _____ (do) it every day. After offering his prayer yesterday, he _____ (go) out for his morning walk and _____ (take) tea as he _____ (drink) tea on regular basis. Then he, as like as other days, _____ (sit) to read papers and after that he_____(start) his journey for office.

Answers: woke, offered, does, went, took, drinks, sat, started

Students' response: In this case, students were asked to write the correct form of verbs by understanding the timely actions in the passage. Here no direction was given whether to use present form of verbs or past form of verbs.

In this case, majority among 30 students wrote the same types of answers. A number of students mistake in adding morpheme 'es', 's' or 'ed' which proves their lack of grammatical competency as when the subject performs the functions in the past time the verb will be in past form and in terms of present time or usual time the third person singular subject should take the verbs adding 'es' or 's' morpheme after the base for of verb.

But, when the feedback was given among the students, some agreed that they knew but forgot to add and did not give attention and also were careless for the time being that proves that some of them were mistaken. Again, a number of students replied that they were ignorant about the rules which led them to write erroneous formation of verbs and they were incompetent.

Above three examples were given with clues but whenever they were asked to write a paragraph of their daily activities, the scenario was not welcomed not only because of incorrect form of verbs but also for unnecessary use of auxiliary verbs where it does not require.

Only the error and mistaken sentences have been extracted from the paragraph here:

×I <u>am wake</u> up early in the morning then I went for walk (grammatically error sentence and mixture of present with past)

×I <u>have take</u> my breakfast. (Grammatically error sentence or it can be a mistake)

× I <u>am go</u> to university. (Grammatically error sentence)

Here, there is no scope for language practitioners and researchers to be confused about learner's mistakes rather it was obvious that these are their errors because of their previous lack of competence and carefulness towards learning.

Example-4: (Excerpt from exam scripts)

In most of the cases, they prone to do errors like below. Here (×) indicates learner's errors/mistakes and the correct answers below every mistakes/errors are given for the sake of researcher's explanation collected from classroom pedagogy.

× I am eat rice √ I eat rice (simple present) √ I am eating rice (present progressive)	×I am go to university √ I go to university √ I am going to university
× I have eat rice √ I have eaten rice	× I have go to university √ I have gone to university
× I eaten rice √ I have eaten rice	×I am gone to university √ I have gone to university

× He eat rice √ He eats rice	×He go to university √ He goes to university
× He is eat rice √ He is eating rice	×He is go to university √ He is going to university
× He has eat rice √ He has eaten rice	×He has go to university √He has gone to university
×We were go for watching movies yesterday night. ×We were go to watch movies. √We went for watching movies yesterday night.	× Traffic jam is being increase day by day √ Traffic jam is increasing day by day

  The chart has shown several ungrammatical sentences those undergraduates prone to do more. It is because they could not take enough input about the use of auxiliary verbs, main verbs and different form of verbs. For these reasons, even in speaking same types of sentences they utter when they deliver message to others. It is also found after examining and analyzing their classroom practices. Learners are found to use unusual auxiliary verbs wherever it is not necessary. Again, they are found not to use auxiliary verbs where it requires. Moreover, they forget to use past participle form of verbs where it requires to be used.

  According to Muslim (2018: 104) some people have the wrong notion that whenever they need to write any past form of sentence, they must use 'was' or 'were' in the sentence. Also he shows some examples which are according to him are fatally wrong.

  ×My father was died
  ×The plane was landed in time at the airport
  ×I was stood in front of Musa's room.

  He found students are in inadequate knowledge of tense that makes the above category as error. The unusual use of be verbs is seen in students writing and the examples of the chart shows the same result.

5.2. Case Study-02: Subject-verb Agreement

  Here the researcher has chosen sub-verb agreement to examine learners' grammatical accuracy. According to Muslim (2018: 49) faulty agreement is a high-frequency error that occurs in writings of both juniors and seniors and for this to him grammatical accuracy deserves special treatment. He (Muslim, 2018) adds also why this subject-verb disagreement or pronoun-antecedent mismatch occurs. The reason according to him is lengthy sentence where people get confused about which word or phrase will be the subject of the sentence.

Here also (×) indicates learner's errors/mistakes and answers are given below the mistakes/errors.

i. Either Alvi or his brothers (make/makes) breakfast each morning.
  × makes √ make
ii. A pack of wild dogs (has/have) frightened all the ducks away.
  × have √ has
iii. Shimu, along with her friends (has/have) gone to the library.
  × have √ has
iv. Ten minutes (isn't/aren't) enough to answer the question.
  × aren't √ isn't
v. Your glasses (was/were) on the bureau last night.
  × was √ were
vi. There (has/have been) too many interruptions in this class.
  × has √ have
vii. The family (was/were) wild with excitement.
  × were √ was
viii. Writing many letters (make/makes) her happy.
  × make √ makes

These all are errors done by the students because they do not know when to use singular verb and when to use plural verb according to the subject but English has some rules where no logic can work. They are unaware about the rules of English language. This is the reason why the answers of above sentences given by the students are termed as errors. Here, the sentences are taken apparently seem that verbs will be according to the more than the exact one. But, in depth learners have to be aware or learn about the rules where verb will be according to the first subject or second subject.

According to Muslim (2011:59) faulty agreement can be avoided if learners remain vigilant about the category of the subject and the verb, and the noun and the pronoun. Again, it can be mistakes if they know the rules and do it because of carelessness, momentary lapse of thought. A researcher can easily understand what student's mistakes are and what their errors is whenever the researcher and the teacher is the same one. Errors can be overcome by knowing the proper use of subjects, verbs according to agreement but mistakes can be overcome by being more conscious about using rules.

5.3. Case Study-03: Active-passive Voices

Most of the time learners do errors in using active-passive senses without knowing the differences according to the researcher. The errors or mistakes in using unusual auxiliary verb without using past participle form of verb are common errors committed by first year learners. When they were given to fill up few gaps with correct form of verbs, the unusual usage of auxiliary verb like (am, is, are, was and were) has been noticed.

Now, in active passive usages same unusual auxiliary verbs are used without knowing

Where active form will be and where passive form will be used. But, if they would use it by being conscious, accurate meaning could be expected. Again, the omitting of auxiliary verbs where necessary to convey the accurate meaning of passive and whose absence expresses the reverse meaning is done by the same learners. The errors were marked when they were asked to write a paragraph about air pollution as the focus of researcher is now to test active passive senses. The responses were noted like these:

Students' response:

a) Air polluted in many ways in Bangladesh. (Absence of 'be' verb)
Effect: meaning totally is changed from the real subject

b) Air is pollute in many ways.
Effect: grammatically error structure without 'ing' verb or past participle form of verb

c) Air pollution is cause for many ways.
Effect: past participle verb is not used and a wrong sentence is written.

d) We are pollute water in many ways.
Effect: Here, 'verb+ing' form is necessary and for not using that the production is incorrect.

e) People are polluted water in many ways.
Effect: Grammatically correct sentence but meaning is not found because of having no concern about the active and passive sense while writing. So researcher can term it as error because this type of sentence construction is no more uncommon. This again can be explained in two ways. Either it can be a mistake by not using 'ing' morpheme rather using 'ed' morpheme.

Again, it can be termed as error without knowing it either ignorantly or unconsciously.

6. Limitations of this study

The study only shows three types of grammatical lapses in writing while there are more grammatical and lexical categorical lapses. Again the researcher here is unable or reluctant to differentiate which example is error and which one is mistake for the sake of interpretation. Besides, no data is collected from learners' oral production.

Moreover, for the limitation of time and inaccessibility to other classes, this study has been conducted on only English classes. As the extracts have been taken from ongoing pedagogy of English, the appendices have not been attached here. Furthermore, this study neither does find the reasons of those lapses learners commit nor it tries to connect any psycholinguistic analysis why these occur frequently from learner's side.

7. Recommendation

From the teaching of English grammar and writing related courses, it is found few errors and mistakes that learners do more in their advanced level. The problem is associated with basic structure of language because for the lack of necessary language input of their second language like English from very early. So, to make them well writer and speaker it is high time to adopt new materials to boost up their learning writing English. The idea of correct form of verbs, knowing subject verb agreement with the proper sense of active and passive is highly recommended to teach them to make up their previous lacking. In tertiary classroom English grammar or foundation subjects in English should be mandatorily offered for the undergraduates.

In tertiary classroom, though in teaching speaking, fluency gets more prioritized, there is no alternative to produce grammatically accurate sentences in academic writing and speaking too. Researchers argue that a proper way of correcting mistakes and errors will help the learners to learn accurate language. While others argue that over correcting may inhibit their learning process being English as their second or foreign langue. Another recommendation in this study for the language practitioner is to teach grammar communicatively though teaching writing is based on linguistic theory. Literature can also be utilized by the teachers in the language classrooms because literary items attract the students more than other study materials. Regarding this perspective, Begum, Hossain & Rahman (2018) stated that literature opens the new doors of opportunity and permits learners to ask, criticize and explore diverse issues and provides the learners a rich source of bona fide materials. After finding learner's needs and specific problems in writing, some grammatical items should be taught on the basis of priority of course, in a contextualized way.

8. Conclusion

This study has finally provided insights into grammatical mistakes and errors what undergraduates usually encounter. It has analyzed these in detail so that other ELT practitioners can infer about their students' performance both inside and outside of the classroom and they can help learners to correct these by providing positive feedback. It will foster teachers to give written feedback but again discourages too much correction which may inhibit them not to produce further. This paper will also help learners who learn English as their foreign or second language to correct their own grammatical lapses. Furthermore this is the revelation of authentic examples which will make English language learners aware about their errors/mistakes in writing. It is also the reflection of boundaries between errors and mistakes that are shown through examples extracted from classroom practices and exam scripts. Again, it provides the pedagogical implications for material developer and syllabus designer to place the importance of few grammatical items foremost because mistaken with these will lead to the wrong production of sentences.

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