

## **Common Verb Errors of EFL Learners in Writing: A Study of Tertiary Level**

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### **Abstract**

*The study explores some common verb errors of the tertiary EFL learners in their composition writing at Prime University, Bangladesh. The study was quantitative in approach. Data were collected from the composition writings of the selected students and errors were identified and classified into different categories. The results were measured on the basis of the frequency of the errors students made. Forty participants including males and females in the equal ratio made different types of errors while using verbs in their writing. The grammatical errors concerning verbs revealed through this study were with subject and verb agreement, verb-missing, verb-tense, infinitive after auxiliary, irregular verb, verb-ing after modal, verb past after infinitive and nonfinite as main verb. However, some pedagogical implications have been included at the end of this study.*

**Keywords:** Verb errors, EFL learners, writing, tertiary level

### **Introduction**

Communicative competence refers to the language ability of an individual, which never comes if any of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) is absent and among the four skills, writing might be considered as the most crucial for L2 learners. According to Brown (2000), out of the four skills in English Language (EL), writing becomes the most confusing and challenging to L2 learners. Among the Bangladeshi tertiary level learners, errors frequently occur in writing, especially the writings of learners are mostly affected by verb related errors as in almost all Bangla sentences, the verb is located at the end but in English it is seen in most cases after the subject and so, L2 learners, the most time, fall into a trouble in using English verbs properly. Language specialists consider the verb as the nucleus of sentences. No sentence can be termed as a sentence unless it contains a verb. But in the context of the learners of Bangladesh, making errors with verbs is a very common phenomenon. Dorn (2000) states that most of the errors in written English are related with verbs and in this connection, maintaining the relationship between subject and verb has been the most challenging for L2 learners especially in the field of writing.

Richards & Renandya (2002) state that writing is the most difficult skill for L2 learners to master. The difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these notions into legible texts. Wee (2009) analyzed Malaysian ESL learners' written verb-form errors and found that errors of malformation were the highest in the writing. E A report indicates that almost 80% percent mistakes happen within the verb-related cases. As the medium of instruction

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at tertiary level is English in our country, it is very imperative for the learners to have a good command in writing though writing comes last, it may be the driving force of the rest three skills. To create a positive awareness to reduce errors with verbs, the study reveals the common types of verb related errors that tertiary learners commit in their writings.

### **Theoretical Overview**

S.P. Corder(1967) introduced the scientific method of error analysis, which has been an important genre of applied linguistics. Corder's process of error analysis not only shows the errors students make but also suggests the ways how the learners attain a second language. Before the introduction of Corder's theory, all types of errors were used to be as defects in language learning but it is error analysis which confirms a systematic analysis of errors and provides useful insights into the processes of language learning so that both teachers, students get a huge scope in the field of developing language skills. Later on, Schaumann & Stenson (1974) and Brown (1994) gave opinions in favor of error analysis for learning a language. Corder also asserts that error analysis not only contributes to students' performance but also provides teachers information about every student's progress. Dulay and Burt (1974) opined that making errors lead the learners to successful learning of a language and error analysis is a great way to achieving the target in language learning. So it has been considered as a universal blessing with regard to learning and teaching of a language. Corder (1974) suggests a five stage process of error analysis and they are the collection of errors, the identification of errors, the description of errors, the explanation of errors, and the evaluation of errors that no doubt work to have positive feedback from the teachers and the students. The present study can be observed through the lens of Corder's approach of error analysis.

### **Objective of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to explore the common verb errors EFL learners of tertiary level commit in their writings. Besides, teachers and students can have the idea of the real situation regarding verb errors and students can be more cautious in using verbs in the appropriate way.

### **Research Question of the Study**

What kinds of verb errors do the Bangladeshi tertiary level students commit in their writings?

### **Literature Review**

Error analysis in writing is not a recent issue in the field of learning English, rather it began by the late 1960s and since then it has been considered a blessing for teaching and learning English language in the arena of writing. Corder (1974) & Abisamra (2003) found that the study of error is a part of the investigation of the process of language learning. Besides, it provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of a learner and may give us indications as to the learning process. A large number of studies have been made home and abroad to investigate the linguistic analysis of errors committed by the L2 learners in different countries of the world. The

researcher has not reviewed all the previous studies in regard to error analysis in writing, but a number of selected studies have been dwelt upon to discover the real scenario in this connection as well as to make contribute further to this issue. It was found from the studies of Abushiba, El-Omri and Tobat (2011), Sarfraz (2011), Darus and Ching (2009) that they investigated the most common errors of the EFL learners in writing. In this connection, Huang (2006) conducted a study about Taiwanese English majors' writing errors based on a web-based writing program and found that most of the errors students made were not due to insufficient command of linguistic knowledge, but for incorrect observance of subject-verb agreement rules. In this regard, Hazaymah (1996) also found in his study that students made a lot of errors in learning English verb tenses as well as in passive sentence constructions. Both of the studies indicated that L2 learners were influenced by their native language when they produced writing in English language. In the same vein, Al-khresheh (2006) analyzed 20 essays written by Jordanian undergraduate EFL learners. He found that students committed a huge number of grammatical, syntactic and lexical errors because of inter lingual interference from their L1.

Dorn (2000) stated in his study that using the verb correctly is the most complex issue to be addressed by L2 learners in their sentences and in most cases, their writings were affected badly because of the deficiency of using verbs. Further he indicated that subject-verb agreement area is very important to express ideas especially in writing. He gave importance on the appropriateness of grammar slips because good writing shows one's proof of mastering the English grammar rules and on the other hand, a poor writing does not convey the message clearly and effectively to the readers. Similarly, Kim (1988) found that the area associated with voice and tense followed by verbs is the most crucial among all the grammatical errors and for this result, he conducted a study among 120 Korean EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students who were asked to translate Korean sentences to English

Another important issue found from the studies of Chen (2001) and Wang (2008) that most of the L2 learners are very weak in English writing and so, whenever they are asked to write, they get puzzled and feel anxious thinking how to start the writing. Wang (2008) further found that sentences with a missing verb, no agreement between the subject and the verb, and confusion on the real meaning of a word are the major issues that were identified in his study.

From the literature it is found that verb is an essential component in producing sentences and grammatical errors cover the highest percentage while they are concerned with verbs. The present study focuses on the verb errors committed by the L2 learners to show the real context of the use of verbs in the sentences as well as to get the positive outcomes through the analysis of the learners' errors with verbs.

## **Methodology**

The study was conducted among students of a private university in Dhaka, who were the students of second semester in different departments. The respondents had a credit hour in English. Randomly 40 students were selected from CSE, EEE, Law, Business and English departments for making the research effective and authentic. Students were divided into two groups whereas one

group comprised males and the other females and the ratio of males and females was equal. Data were collected using a quantitative approach and the percentages were made on the basis of the total quantity of verb errors committed by the tertiary learners in their given composition writing. Students in the EFL classroom were given four particular topics to write about. They were asked to write one of the four alternatives. The topics were namely Your Country, Your Village, Your City and Your Hobby. Furthermore, they were well informed that this writing would not affect their academic results. Both the duration of time and the length(word limit) were set by the researcher. Finally, all the data regarding verb errors were identified and categorized following the frequency counts and percentages.

### Data Analysis and Discussion

The examples below are directly quoted from the respondents' composition writing. In this section the incorrect form of verb is underlined while the correct one is enclosed within parenthesis in the tables below:

#### i) Error with Subject –Verb Agreement

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
No agreement between subject and verb	195	24.04%
<b>Examples:</b> a. People <u>has</u> (have) rights to go anywhere of the country. b. Flood <u>visit</u> (visits) every year in our country. c. Hobby <u>help</u> (helps) an individual to be imaginative. d. The man who loves his country <u>have</u> (has) many responsibilities to the nation. e. The people of Bangladesh <u>is</u> (are) very friendly.		

Table-1

It was found from the writing of the students that the highest number of mistakes occurred in subject- verb agreement. The above table containing examples revealed that the selection of subject and verb is a crucial issue for the EFL learners though in many cases they have the theoretical knowledge that if the subject is singular, verb will be singular and a plural subject takes a plural verb, it is hardly applied in practical use.

#### ii) Error with Active-passive Moods

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Mismatch between auxiliary and main verbs	130	16.03%
<b>Examples:</b> a. My village <u>was name</u> (was named) Gurudaspur after the independence. b. The road <u>constructed</u> (was constructed) last year. c. I <u>was saw</u> (saw) a boy. d. They <u>were come</u> (came). e. Village farmers <u>are worked</u> (work) every day. f. She <u>has been made</u> (has made) a plan.		

Table-2

Making errors in active and passive voice structures has been one of the major problems of the L2 learners because every learner is prone to the influence of his/her native language on learning second language that makes him/her commit such errors. These examples show that identifying active –passive voice structures is very challenging for the L2 learners, let alone applying correctly in their writings.

*iii) Error with the omission of verbs*

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Missing verb	107	13.19%
<b>Examples:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. People <u>living</u> (are living) in the city.</li> <li>b. Its color<u>red</u> (is red).</li> <li>c. I <u>often</u> (am often) sad.</li> <li>d. The stars <u>visible</u> (are visible) in the sky.</li> <li>e. Dhaka (is) an old city.</li> <li>f. Everything (is) under control.</li> </ul>		

**Table-3**

It was found from the examples that learners forgot to use ‘to be’ verb forms when they were the main verbs of the sentences and this incident happened due to the native language influence of the learners in learning English. In Bangla ‘be’ verb remains silent when it acts as the main verb in the sentences. Besides, Verb(ing) cannot be considered as a verb until an auxiliary or ‘be’ verb is used before verb(ing).

*iv) Error with Identifying Present, Past, Future Tense Forms*

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Inability to identify present, past, future tense forms	102	12.58%
<b>Examples:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Govt. <u>construct</u> (will construct) some roads next year.</li> <li>b. Once upon a time, there <u>is</u> (was) a Dighi here.</li> <li>c. Now I <u>made</u> (make) a garden in front of my reading room.</li> <li>d. In future, Bangladesh <u>improved</u> (will improve).</li> <li>e. At present, city people <u>solved</u> (solve) the problem.</li> <li>f. In 1971, Bangladesh <u>come</u> (came) into being a new country.</li> </ul>		

**Table-4**

Though a number of students used some tense indications including present, past and future, they could not make the sentences according to the context of tenses. The examples of the table 4 show the scenario of the learners in case of ensuring the proper use of tenses. Despite studying the tenses repeatedly, learners could hardly trace the tenses in their writing. However, tense is an entity located within the verb of a sentence.

**v) Error with Using Infinitive after Auxiliary Verb:**

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Wrongly used infinitive after auxiliary verb	85	10.48%
<b>Examples:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Villagers need not <u>to buy</u> (buy) vegetables from the market.</li> <li>We did not <u>to come</u> (come) to the city.</li> <li>People must <u>to see</u> (see) the change of society in future.</li> <li>They may <u>to come</u> (come) here for treatment.</li> </ol>		

**Table-5**

The table 5 presented the examples of the sentences, learners used in their writings. L2 learners committed mistakes in terms of using the infinitive correctly. Actually the infinitive is placed after the main verb that has not been followed in their writing.

**vi) Error with Using of Irregular Verb:**

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Misconception of the use of irregular verb	81	9.99%
<b>Examples:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>God <u>maked</u> (made) the country.</li> <li>Last year Bangladesh <u>falld</u> (fell) a victim to flood.</li> <li>She <u>telled</u> (told) the news.</li> <li>Govt' <u>tryed</u> (tried) to develop the city.</li> </ol>		

**Table-6**

In some cases, it is found that students had added (ed) with the irregular verbs and this also occurred due to the influence of native language which affects English language learning efforts badly. In case of using two types of verbs (strong and weak verbs), learners get confused. Besides, there is a common notion to make past and past participle forms by adding d, ed to the verbs. But it is quite different from the use of irregular verbs in English as they have their particular forms.

**vii) Error with Verb-ing after Modal Auxiliary:**

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Verb-ing after modal auxiliary	48	5.92%
<b>Example:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hobby must <u>helping</u> (help) a man from monotonous life.</li> <li>We have to <u>making</u> (make) a plan.</li> <li>We should <u>living</u> (live) together in the society.</li> <li>We have to <u>helping</u> (help) one another.</li> <li>City people may <u>facing</u> (face) many problems.</li> <li>Govt' will have to <u>encouraging</u> (encourage) people.</li> </ol>		

**Table-7**

It was found from the examples in Table7 that learners could not make the proper use of modal auxiliary verbs, rather made errors by writing verb(ing) after the modal .But the correct

conception is that after the modal verbs, the base form of the main verb is required in the sentences, which are in active mood.

**viii) Error with Using Verb Past forms after Infinitive:**

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Wrongly used verb past forms after infinitive	39	4.81%
<b>Example:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are many attractive places to <u>saw</u> (see) in our country.</li> <li>Hobby helps to <u>made</u> (make) people active.</li> <li>Bangladesh is to <u>faced</u> (face) many problems.</li> <li>City people wish to <u>travelled</u> (travel) to the village for recreation.</li> </ol>		

**Table-8**

The above examples of learners in Table 8 reveal that learners wrongly used verb past form after the infinitive that leads the learners towards writing incorrect sentences in English. The common conception is that after the infinitive, base form of verb is used. However, the frequency of making errors occurs because learners get confused to identify the base form of verb.

**ix) Error with Non-finite verbs used as Main verbs:**

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Non-finite verbs used as main verbs	24	2.96%
<b>Example:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I saw some people <u>was going</u> (going) to market.</li> <li><u>Collect</u> (Collecting) stamp is my hobby.</li> <li>People <u>are living</u> (living) in Dhaka are busy.</li> <li>Village people usually spend their time <u>are working</u> (working) in the field.</li> </ol>		

**Table-9**

Table 9 reveals that learners used 'to be' verbs before (ing verb) as they thought 'going' in sentence (a) should be used as the main verb. But in fact, it is not the main verb, rather it is a participle. Some students wrongly thought of 'going' as a main verb. But the main verb in sentence (a) is 'saw'. In sentence (b) 'collecting' is not a verb, it's a gerund. In case of sentence (c) learners think 'living' as main verb and accordingly, they added 'be' verb before 'living' but the fact is that it is not the main verb, rather it is a present participle. The same case also happened in sentence (d). Moreover, all the participles and gerunds are considered as nonfinite verbs.

## Pedagogical Implications

It is implied from the analysis of the data that L2 learners face a lot of problems with verbs in writing English sentences. The problems are easy to be solved if teachers and students work together in this regard. One thing becomes obvious that long-term learning English of the L2 learners can never guarantee that they will be able to write without verb errors because merely memorization does not address the real situation which students encounter while writing. Though

various verb-related grammatical guidelines in subject-verb, verb-tense, active-passive, infinitive and modal auxiliaries are given in the class-room, these grammatical guidelines have little applications in the class, rather they are memorized as rules and confined to verbal production. Actually theoretical grammar is not enough to have a significant positive impact in case of overcoming all the limitations of verb errors in the EFL learners' writings. However, mere grammar-translation method cannot help the learners to gain a real conception regarding the correct writing in English. In this connection, Mohammad (1996) states that teachers and researchers should explain the problems using first language in the classroom and try to show the similarities and differences between the native and the target language before the L2 learners so that the learners would be able to identify their previous linguistic misconceptions and modify them while learning the target language. So, a teacher should be the mediator to fill in the gaps between the native and that target language and show the remedial exercises to the L2 learners in developing writing capacity. Gas and Selinker (2001) opine that through explaining the findings before the learners in the language classes, teachers can make them understand their errors. Moreover, it is a good way to find out their errors and give directions to make them correct through individual and group discussion. James (1996) states that teachers should provide hints so that they can identify their errors and make them rectify with their own capacity.

Besides, in Bangladesh, learners for many reasons become confused in identifying the verb in the sentence. Teachers should help the students in this regard. In addition to that, new practice oriented approach can be included to teach the students. To encourage the learners to write up something, the teacher should give the learners some clues or information in Bangla as it is their native language. The teacher should not only present the data repeatedly and go through the same sets of drills and exercises, but also comprehend the sources of errors so that he can help the learners discover the relevant rules for application. Frodensen (2001) remarks in this connection, analysis of such texts can help learners who are already familiar with prescriptive grammar rules but who still have problems understanding and appropriately using grammatical appositions. Text analysis can also benefit learners with mostly implicit knowledge of grammar rather than explicit rule-based knowledge.

## Conclusion

As is shown in the study, it is evident that the learners of tertiary level in Bangladesh are making a huge number of verb errors. From the findings of the learners, it may be observed that learners make different types of common verb errors but all the participants do not make the same types of verb errors in their writing that are clearly indicated in the tables above. The study found nine types of verb errors which are about subject and verb agreement, active – passive moods, verb-missing, verb-tense, infinitive after auxiliary, irregular verb, verb-ing after modal, verb past after infinitive and nonfinite as main verb. In this connection, pedagogical implications have been included although there may have some limitations of the present study because the study is accomplished only among the students of Prime University. So, further study in this field may be required to have more findings in future. Finally, it can be stated that success in regard of the use of verbs never comes automatically but it may come eventually if things are done properly.



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