

# Error Analysis in the Written Works of Bangladeshi EFL University Fresh Learners

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**Abstract:** This paper envisages the university fresh learners' syntactic errors in the use of Tense from the EFL context of Bangladesh. Written essays from thirty university freshers from one private and one public university have been collected and analysed to find out the root causes of the learners' errors in their written works. As found chiefly the causes, the mother language interference, as well as the other socio-economic factors, are responsible. Qualitative research design has been employed in data collection, identification and explanation of the study. The identified data have been classified with proper description and explanation of the error types. The errors have been identified and explained so that the teachers can have enough knowledge on the type, causes & sources of the learners' errors. So, the teacher might devote special attention to certain areas and can devise new pedagogical approaches to help learners overcome those difficulties.

**Key words:** Errors, syntactic errors, causes, sources, plausible solutions

## I. INTRODUCTION

This is quite inevitable that the learners of EFL or ESL context commit errors in the process of acquiring the writing skill of any foreign or second language. Therefore, it is often observed as a common problem that the Bangladeshi EFL learners struggle hard to acquire the satisfactory level of proficiency in written English. It is also quite questionable that the students continue making various syntactic errors in their written works even though the concerned syntactic rules have been repeatedly taught to them through formal classroom instructions for twelve years as English is taught as a compulsory subject in all schools and tertiary institutions. It is undesirable for a student, entering the university education, to commit a lot of syntactic errors specially, in the use of tense and auxiliaries. Sometimes, it is seen that on the very first class, the students write sentences about his/her educational background as- "when I was go to a college, I was enjoy very much" (Kayum, 2011). This clearly shows that many of the students in Bangladeshi universities struggle to acquire the basic syntactic rules of Tense and auxiliaries even at the level when they are supposed to deal with the tougher linguistic courses and language research. In such situation, the university itself faces a lot of difficulties as the medium of instructions in all universities are in English and a student is assessed by his written English expressions in the examination scripts. Several studies have been done earlier on the pedagogical level on the same issue- such as, - Fahmida (2010), Khanom (2014), Rehnuma (2015), Tina (2016), Karim (2017) and so on. However, the problem retains. Therefore, a

systematic syntactic error analysis in learners' use of tense focusing specially on the type, causes and sources of these repeated errors, might determine the plausible causes and sources of their errors and thus, can offer some guidelines to the tutors to devise their learning strategies.

## II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite having enough background in English lessons from primary to higher secondary schools, the Bangladeshi students, entering the university studies, still continue displaying weaknesses in English, especially in their productive skills of writing (Azad, 2016; Karim, Maasum & Lotif, 2017). Although English is the only medium of expressions and students' writing is the only medium of their skill assessment, the learners commit a lot of errors which might be traced to various sources. Studies (Akhter, 2016; Roy, 2016) also focused that the problem in writing is severe in secondary and in higher secondary levels. In the tertiary levels, they continue showing a very poor command in their writings (Azad, 2016). Very recent studies like- Karim, Maasum & Lotif, 2017; Afrin, 2016; Talukder & Samuel, 2017, have shown that, the present university learners' writings are full of erroneous structures both of lexical and of syntactic errors. This clearly shows that they have serious problems in getting their productive skill of writing correct whereas, they are considered as the learners of the tougher linguistic courses later on. Two kinds of errors are mostly predominant in English language- lexical i.e. vocabulary and spellings and syntactic i.e. grammatical errors related to word classes (parts of speech, tense, auxiliaries etc.). James (1998, p.143) said, "lexical errors are the most frequent category of errors" (cited by Hallat, 2004). This paper deals with only the students' syntactic errors in the use of tense.

### *Research Objectives*

To conduct this study, the following objectives have been laid out:

1. To propose an inventory of the most common errors in the syntactic category of the use of tense and auxiliaries in the written works of Bangladeshi university freshers
2. To identify and analyse the plausible causes and sources of the learners' syntactic error in the use of tense and auxiliaries.

### Research Questions

In correspondence to the above, the research questions of this study have been formulated as below:

1. What are the most common syntactic errors that Bangladeshi university fresh learners commit in the use of tense and auxiliaries?
2. Which are the plausible causes and sources of the learners' syntactic errors in the use of tense and auxiliaries?
3. Does the native language (L1) interference play a crucial role in producing the syntactic error of the use of tense and auxiliaries in English writing of the Bangladeshi university freshers?

### Significance Of The Study

This study proposes an inventory of the major syntactic errors in the use of tense and the value of this inventory will be to direct the teacher's attentions to these problems so that he/she might redesign the teaching pedagogies to overcome these. Moreover, the study analyses these errors with a view to finding out the plausible causes and sources of these. As a result of learning the sources of errors, the teachers might be able to develop or change materials or can redesign the remedial measures to help learners avoid or at least minimize the percentage of syntactic errors. To eradicate learners' writing errors, this study of error analysis bears a great significance for understanding the errors in its true colours and the sources. Thus, the study contributes to the theoretical development in the written SLA studies in Bangladesh. So, the potential findings of this error analysis study will be beneficial for the world's EFL learners, especially for the Bangladeshi learners, instructors and for the subsequent linguists and researchers.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This part consists of the research design, Sampling, Data collection and Data analysis procedures of the study

#### Research Design

In this study, qualitative research design has been employed in investigating the most common errors of the Bangladeshi EFL university freshers while using the syntactic category of tense and auxiliaries.

#### Sampling

The target of the study was to analyse the syntactic errors in the written works of university freshers in Bangladesh. So, the students who have completed their 12 years of schooling and have just been admitted into various universities after being qualified in the entrance examinations. The rationale for choosing the Bangladeshi university fresh students is due to the researcher's familiarity with Bengali language and the Bangladeshi students' difficulties with their productive skill of writing. For this study, 30 fresher students of English Department from both public and private universities of Bangladesh were randomly selected. The sample population

comprised both males and females, and their ages were between 19 and 22.

#### Data collection & Instruments

The data for this study was the written compositions. Each of the participants wrote 3 compositions of 250 words of each within a time limit of total 2 hours. The purpose of the researcher was to collect their natural written works and so, they were not informed that their works would be used to investigate their competence in English writing. They were called in a workshop with some other issues and their compositions were personally collected by the researcher. The specific topics were selected with prior concern to the use of tense; such as-

1. The celebration of Bengali New Year's Day "Pahela Boishak"
2. My Daily activities
3. An unforgettable day in my life
4. Memories of my school days
5. My ambition
6. My future dream/ plan

Among the above six topics, the students were asked either to select odd series (1,3,5) or the even series (2,4,6) so that the collected samples may cover the sufficient data on the use of the aspects of tense. The following table gives the clear picture of the sample and the data collection instrument:

Table-1:

Sample	Age	Educational level & native language	Level of English	Instrument
15 students from private & another 15 from public universities	19-22 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freshers at Bangladeshi universities</li> <li>• Bengali</li> </ul>	Intermediate	03 written English compositions

#### Data Analysis procedures

Each script of the learners was read by the researcher and then, an analysis of the syntactic errors of Tense, as either misuse, dropping or wrong use, were explained by means of error analysis and cross-linguistic theories to show the mother language interference or any other factors contributing to learners' errors. The gradual stages of data analysis are as follows:

- a. Data collection
- b. Error identification
- c. Error classification
- d. Error description
- e. Error explanation
- f. Pedagogical application

Through the above ways, the researcher reaches to the findings of his research questions. The various stages of data analysis are briefly described below:

#### a. Data Collection

As mentioned earlier, the written compositions of 100 university fresh students on 03 different topics were collected from where the relevant data of the syntactic errors in the use of tense was found.

#### b. Error Identification

The British standard written English has been taken as standard criteria. The rationale for this is because the English in Bangladeshi universities are mostly based on British standard English (Rumnaz, 2005). So, the deviation from this standard norm was considered as error.

#### c. Error Classification

The identified errors need to be classified or labelled properly keeping the variables in mind so that these can be described, interpreted and can direct tutors for pedagogical implication. Categorizing errors create 'easier management of the errors for other stages of description, explanation and pedagogical application' (Zarina, 1996, p.23)

#### d. Description of Error

The learners' errors were described from the syntactic level with the three main purposes clarified by James (1998). The first was to make clear what otherwise would be, "tacit and on the level of intuition, so as to justify one's intuitions. Perhaps, it is the basic human instinct to apply labels to entities and by so doing to give them substance (p.96)". The second purpose of description is that, it is a 'pre-requisite for counting errors' (p.97). The third purpose is to 'create categories' (p.97). Syntactic errors will be classified into four main types on the basis of their processes: omission, addition, substitution and permutation or wrong ordering, according to Corder (1981), Mckeating (1981) and Brown (1984) as cited by Hallat, (2004).

#### e. Explanation of errors

All the categorize errors were explained systematically focussing on the causes and sources of every single error which is the ultimate objective of error analysis (Corder, 1981).

#### f. Pedagogical Application

This is the last stage of error analysis from where the teachers can have enough knowledge on the type, causes & sources of learners' errors. So, the teacher might devote special attention to certain areas and can devise new pedagogical approaches to help learners overcome those difficulties.

### IV. DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

A brief description of the types followed by the findings, the present study categorises, is given below:

- i. **Omission:** This often happens in the writings of Bangladeshi university freshers. For example, they are often seen writing like-

- When I was there, he also with me
- He go to his university.

This might happen as there is no custom of adding 's' or 'es' in the present tense of the learners' native language.

- ii. **Addition:** Very often the learners use some unnecessary elements as they most of the time compare English with their native language or might be for some other factors. Corder (1973) describes this process as "the addition of some unnecessary elements (p.277)". For example-

- They did not enjoyed there.

This sometimes happens when learners translate the Bengali expression of this- 'Tara shekhane upovog kore ni'.

- She does not believes this.
- She can sings a song

In their native language Bengali, there is no rule that after model auxiliary, one should not use present tense verbs with 's' or 'es'. Therefore, they get confused and make error.

- iii. **Substitution:** In this category, the learners often supplement a wrong aspect of tense or auxiliaries for a correct one. For example-

- They haven't come here **yesterday (yet)**
- Neither he nor his friends **was (were)** there
- We **must have to go (must go/ have to go)** there.

Such errors of substitutions have been categorized separately for analysis in this study.

#### iv. Permutation or wrong ordering:

This often happens in Bangladesh as the learners' written English learning process is highly influenced by their native language, Bengali. In the native language, there are many flat structures unlike English. For example- 'My daughter is reading oxford dictionary' cannot be written as- 'Oxford dictionary reading my daughter is'; whereas, in Bengali expression of the same sentence- 'amar meye oxford ovidhan porse' can be expressed meaningfully as 'oxford ovidhan porse amar meye'. That is why, a separate category will be created for the learners' errors in permutation or wrong ordering which according to Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982), this process is 'word-for-word translations of native language surface structures' (cited by, Hallat, 2004).

### V. MORE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the authentic data and systematic analysis of the study, some specific findings have been identified. L1 and L2 interferences are the major contributors to these findings. In some studies, many researchers suggest that there occur more interferences between L1 and L2 when these languages contain similar patterns. People often show more lexical interference on similar items. (Albert and Obler, 1978). For

dissimilar aspects, some learners often get confused and make erroneous expressions.

- ❖ From the sampled data, it is also obvious that some participants transferred all the features of '*bortoman kal*' into 'present simple form' which is a negative transfer. The result is the erroneous expressions in EFL writing. But a few of the learners show the positive transfer as they were able to distinguish that not all the features in the first language similar to the target language. It shows that there are variations in the language skills even among the same level (upper-intermediate) of EFL learners. The study observes almost three categories into the university freshers. Some of them went for direct translation from the native language and some others are also translating, although making some changes in word order, and a few of them are truly making the positive transfer.
- ❖ From the findings, it shows that the similarities both in Bengali and English present tense features facilitate the acquisition of the target language to a few learners who are conscious about the dissimilar aspects as well.
- ❖ However, there are some differences in its use. Unlike English language, there is no rule of adding 's' or 'es' after the verb. In Bengali language, the verbs for both singular and plural forms are same, however, in English language the present tense is marked through the suffixes 's' for singular and without 's' for plural. For example- in English, 'He goes to university' has a distinct feature in English although in Bengali, '*sha school e jai*' or '*ami school e jai*' (I go to school) use the same verb without adding any suffix. So, the missing inflection markers in Bengali language sometimes create trouble in producing correct English sentences and the learners who most of the time make a parallelism between the native language and the target language often get confused.
- ❖ Another difference between Bengali and English is that, the English language always follows the particular pattern or structure to express in present simple form, whereas the Bengali language follows the flat structures. For example- 'He goes to school' can no way be said as, 'He school goes'. But this is possible in Bengali language, '*sha school e jai*' can be spoken meaningfully as '*sha jai school e*'. Therefore, the learners often make mistakes in applying English in their EFL written works.
- ❖ In the forms of English Tenses, the 'time word' is always fixed in the position; for example, - in the structure of simple present form (sub.+ verb+ object), the position of time word cannot be changed, but in Bengali language, the time word can be in any order either at the beginning, middle or even at the final position in the sentence,

- ❖ The use of minor word class, auxiliaries- like do auxiliaries (do, does etc.) or modal auxiliaries (can, could, may, might, should, would, ought to, need, must, dare, shall, will, have to, has to, had to etc.) are quite a common feature in any English sentence where these auxiliaries act as the syntactic head in the sentences. But, in Bengali language, there is no specific use of auxiliaries either in Bengali present tense or in past tense forms. The use of this feature, therefore, has been very confusing for the native Bengali users in acquiring the English temporal systems.
- ❖ The findings reveal that most of the sentences of English tenses show the tendency of missing suffixes. As suggested by Selinker (1979) because, this is new and totally different from their first language, they were referring to the first language structures to help them understand
- ❖ The finding also deals with the missing inflectional markers in English sentences. The users of upper-intermediate level encounter a problem regarding this matter. It is believed that besides the lack of understanding of inflectional rules, it is also possibly caused by the influence of the first language.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The present study, thus, suggests that the similar features of native and foreign languages facilitate the learners' foreign language acquisition. Contrarily, the dissimilar aspects often create confusion and often result in EFL learners' mistakes in their written works. If the two languages are completely different from one another in features and usage, it is possible for the learners to understand and master the target language without any interference from the first language. But the findings of the study show that there are many similar and dissimilar aspects between Bengali and English languages. So, the practitioners, learners, and instructors should be very conscious and should follow the appropriate pedagogies to overcome the errors. The present study also recommends further research on error analysis from the EFL context of Bangladesh which might focus on the pedagogical aspects in overcoming the learners' syntactic errors related to tense and aspects.

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## APPENDIX

*Topics of the written essays for the EFL Bangladeshi university freshers:*

The following specific topics were selected with prior concern to the use of tense in the written compositions-

1. The celebration of Bengali New Year's Day "Pahela Boishak"
2. My Daily activities
3. An unforgettable day in my life
4. Memories of my school days
5. My ambition
6. My future dream/ plan

Table// sample & data collection instrument:

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