

## **Analyzing Common Errors in English Composition at Postgraduate Level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan)**

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### **Abstract**

The present study was conducted to identify and classify the most common errors committed by students at postgraduate level in English writing skill. English is considered as second language for Pakistani students. It is used as medium of instruction in many universities in Pakistan. The main focus of the study was to investigate L2 learners' errors in writing skill. To achieve the objective of the study, data from 90 students were obtained from six institutes of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Fifteen participants were selected randomly from each institute, studying at postgraduate level at the department of English. Sample students were assigned to write essay of 250 to 300 words on one of the three given topics: My Favourite Season, An Unforgettable Incident of my Life, and My Hobby. For identifying common errors in L2 writing, the students' writings were analyzed with the help of checklists in order to classify different types of errors made by the respondents. The results of the study revealed that the most common and frequent errors made by the students were of verb tense, spelling, inappropriate use of vocabulary and subject/verb agreement.

**Keywords:** L2 writing, students' errors, postgraduate level, english composition

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## **Introduction**

Among integrated skills of English, writing is considered the trickiest ability for foreigners or second language learners to master. The complexity lies not only in the creation and organization of ideas; rather translating these ideas into readable text is the most difficult phenomena. The intricacy develops greater if learners' language skill is weak. Coffrey (1987) stated that writing, like speaking is an essential means of communication in which someone can express one's ideas, intentions, hopes, and findings to other people. Consequently, the aim and purpose of learning writing skill is to develop communicative proficiency which means students are able to compose language components well and to express ideas or opinions clearly in order to communicate successfully with other people. Writing in a second language (L2) writer frequently faces problems at all stages of learning, particularly in essay writing, for the reason that in this activity, writing is generally extended and thus it becomes more difficult than in the case of writing a short paragraph. Widdowson (1978) views, that writing is an act of composing correct sentences and transmitting them through the visual medium of marks on paper. To achieve this goal, a learner faces a complex set of challenges that include mastering numerous grammatical, lexical, and syntactic proficiencies that seem both daunting at times and possibly insurmountable at others. In fact, sometimes the written word is the only acceptable way to communicate. Ulijn and Strother (1995) explain that writing is one of the most significant integrated skills of language learning for the second language learners. In Pakistani universities, English writing is considered an essential means in students' academia, as most of research work hinge upon it and it is must for students in many spectrums like taking notes, writing their compositions, answering written questions, and writing experimental reports, etc. Besides this the process of writing through a practical research task is useful for developing the students' cognitive skills in acquiring the necessary strategies such as analyzing results of a research task, inferring from the significant differences observed in comparing means, frequencies (Bacha, 2002). On these bases, writing is given an important position in the curriculum of English as a major, and for academic purposes. In Pakistan, English writing is given stress in teaching learning process of higher education as English language is the medium of instruction at this level. Alexander (2008) asserts that writing is an essential element of language learning therefore strong ability of writing can enhance students' chances for success. Hyland (2003) thinks that while acquiring English skills (L2) writers face a lot of troubles due to its burden of rules, very often learners commit a lot of errors even though these are considered an inevitable part of EFL student writing. It has often been observed that EFL writing is commonly

shorter, less cohesive and fluent, and consists of more errors (Hyland, 2003, Ferris, 2002). For indicating students' deficiencies in English writing skills, the error analysis is considered as the best tool to use. According to Hasyim and Sumardi (2002), errors analysis is the course of action in which researcher observes, analyzes, and classifies the deviation of the norms and system of the second language and its ultimate purpose is to disclose the systems maneuver by learner. In easy words, we can say that error analysis is a way of identifying, classifying and, interpreting the objectionable forms created by someone while learning a second language.

Although English is not the native language of Pakistani students yet it is being taught as a compulsory subject from class one up to graduation level. It is a second language for the students. Therefore, students face a lot of problems to learn English language. It is an official language in Pakistan and the most growing language of the world while Pakistani students suffer from inferiority complex due to lack of competency in this language. At present, English has become matter of social status and key to success in all walks of life. Therefore, importance of English cannot be denied. English surpasses world languages and therefore, all communication and publication is done in English language (UNESCO, 2009). "English in Pakistan serves as a gateway to success, to further education and to white collar jobs. It is the language of higher education and wider education and not the home language of the population except in the upper strata of society where it is spoken as a status symbol" (Ghani, 2003:105).

Writing is productive skill and a major component of language therefore it is considered one of the important indicators of language learning. The competency to write down something in a productive form is a sign of success during the learning process (Geiser & Studly, 2001). Academic success is thought to be a good indicator in language learning process (Benjamin & Chun, 2003). While writing English language our students commit a large number of errors and mistakes in spite of getting higher level education. Keeping all the factors in view the researchers have conducted errors analysis of students' writing in English composition at postgraduate level for the awareness of students and teachers to cope with difficult and hard area of English language. Error Analysis is considered as supportive in second language learning as it can disclose to teachers, textbook writers and syllabus designers the problematic areas of learning. The main objective of the study was to investigate common errors made by students in English writing skill at postgraduate level.

## **Review of Literature**

The present study employs the term "error" to refer to a systematic deviation from already established norm (after Burt et al. 1982) or set of norms. Different experts of language have termed linguistic errors in various ways. As great expert of errors analysis Hendrickson (1978:p.387) considered error as "An utterance, form or structure that a particular language teacher deems unacceptable because of its inappropriate use or its absence in reading discourse."

James (1988) thinks that EA is one of the high-ranking theories of second language learning. It is associated with the analysis of the errors made by L2 learners by comparing the learners' acquired norms with the target language norms and explaining the identified errors. Crystal (1999) views, that error analysis is the study of improper forms generated by L2 learners during the learning of a foreign/ second language. James deems (2001) that errors analysis refers to "the study of linguistic ignorance, the investigation of what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance" while Brown (as cited in Ridha, 2012) defines error analysis as "the process to observe, classify and analyze the deviations of the rules of the second/foreign languages and then to reveal the systems operated by learner".

### **Significance of Errors Analysis**

Corder (1974) deems that Error Analysis is a useful tool in second language learning for the reason that it reveals the problematic areas of language learning to syllabus designers, teachers, and textbook writers. Lightbown and Spada (2000) explain that when errors are repeated, particularly when these are shared by nearly all students in a class, it is helpful for teachers to bring the problems to the students' attention. "Errors can tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently, what remains for him or her to learn. So, students errors are valuable feedbacks" (Xie & Jiang, 2007:13).

Numerous theorists and educators have focused in the field of error analysis on the importance of second language learners' errors. Corder (1967) declares that errors are important in three aspects. First they enlighten to the teachers that to what extent the learners have advanced towards the goal, and which area remains for the students to learn. Second, errors give information to the researchers that how language may be acquired or learnt, what procedures or strategies the students are taking up in their discovery of the language. Thirdly, errors are useful to the pupils themselves, for the reason that we can regard the making of errors as a device the learners use in order to learn. Research has proved that detection of learners' errors can be used as an effective means of improving grammatical accuracy (Carroll and Swain, 1993).

Al-haysoni (2012) thinks that researchers are interested in error analysis as they consider that errors are beneficial for both learners and teachers. Error analysis let the teachers and students know their deficiencies in teaching learning process. This assists the teachers in three aspects, firstly to correct learners' errors, secondly to improve their teaching and thirdly to concentrate on those areas that need improvement. Weireesh (1991) gives special importance to learners' errors he thinks that committing errors is a good device that how learners progress in orders to learn. He deems that EA is a valuable support to recognize and explain difficulties confronted by learners. He further says that EA provides a reliable feedback which is helpful in designing a remedial teaching method. Candling (2001) says that L2 learners' errors are significant for the understanding of the processes of Second Language acquisition. Olasehinde (2002) considers that errors committing is unavoidable phenomena in second language writing and he suggests that errors are inescapable and an essential element of the language learning.

Wyatt (1973) carried out a research on errors committed by the prospective participants of the East African Certificate Examination. He noted fourteen types of errors. The findings of his study illustrated that the main areas of errors were spelling (18.4%), sentence structure (16.6%), verb groups (15.2%) and noun groups (16.2%), punctuation (7.8%), while the other nine kinds of errors were less than five percent each. Those were: Pronouns (1.6%), prepositions (4.1%), adjectives (2.4%), confusion and misuse of idioms (4.7%), intensifiers (0.6%), contraction, abbreviation and informalities (2.6%), repetition (3.7%), clumsy or meaningless expression (2.4%) and carelessness (3.6%).

James (1988) explains that errors in writing such as prepositions, tenses, and weak vocabulary are the largest part of errors which are commonly committed by English language learners. As grammar is considered as a means to an end, some learners tend to re-emphasize its significance and in the process, they commit more and more errors. The English learners usually confront troubles while learning the grammatical portions of the Target Language (TL), such as in the use of preposition, subject-verb agreement, articles and the use of correct tense. Abushihab et al (2011) studied grammatical errors in Jordan they noted down that the most problematic areas of the students in paragraph writing were verbs, prepositions, morphological errors, passivisation, articles, and tense.

Radwan (1988) carried out a study on grammatical and lexical errors. The findings of his study showed that the errors made in the use of articles were in the highest percentage. This was followed by relative-clause errors, genitive errors, number errors, word class errors, and then other miscellaneous errors. Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali (2000) examined written errors of Jordanian students they found that the most frequent errors made by their respondents were tense errors. Darus and Subramaniam (2009) conducted a study while using Corder's (1967) model on error analysis, they investigated errors in corpus of 72 written essays by 72 Malay learners. They discovered that respondents' errors were of 6 types, i.e. in verb tense, singular/plural form, preposition, word choice, word order, and subject-verb agreement.

### **Research Methodology**

The focus of this study was to investigate and analyze the most common errors of students in English writing at Master level at English departments in Khyber Pakhtunkwa Province therefore; the study was limited to Khyber Pakhtunkwa Province. In this way, all the students studying at Master Level at English Departments in KP constituted the population of this study. From the whole population, 6 institutes teaching at Master Level were selected as sample of the study using convenience sampling. From each sample institute, 15 students studying at English Department were selected using convenience sampling. In this way, 90 students constituted the sample of this study.

It is an exploratory study in its nature. It aims only to explore the research questions. It only investigates the research topic with varying levels of depth. After the thorough study of related literature, English composition of three different topics of 250-300 words on (my hobby, my favorite season, unforgettable incident of my life) were taken as a data and its errors analysis were done. The data for the research were collected with the help of student's favorite essay. The written essay of each sample student was analyzed while keeping all the rules of English writing in view. Clear instructions were provided to respondents and it was assured that information provided by respondents would be used only for research purpose. The data collected through essays were analyzed in frequency and percentage. Each error was descriptively analyzed by using the following steps. Corder (1967) model for errors analysis was adopted for the present study. In the light of the model first data were collected and the errors were identified by carefully examining all erroneous sentences. Then, the errors were described and classified into four different types. Then findings and conclusions were drawn from the analyzed data.

## Results of the Study

The analysis of the obtained data indicated that students committed different kinds of errors which were categorized into different types.

**(1) Use of incorrect forms of verbs:** students have used incorrect form of verbs although tense used correctly but they committed errors while using form of verb. According to rules we cannot use first or second form after have or has but respondents have used this wrongly. In the same way we always use first form after modal auxiliary verbs i.e. must, can, could, ought, etc, but students have used got, felt, spent, and blessed with them.

Example 1: *I have spend previous two years in university.* (spent)

Example 2: *I taken some important books and start reading.* (take)

Example 3: *I could not got success in the further process.* (get)

Example 4: *We can spend our time with ease.* (spend)

**(2) Use of Present Tense instead of Past Tense:** In this type of error participants have used present tense instead of past. Whenever, we want to narrate past incidents, stories or events we use past tense but here students have used present tense wrongly. In the below mentioned examples; concentrate, come, feel, spend, leads, has, reach, am, is, and receive are all present form of verbs while used wrongly by the participants.

Example 1: *I was busy in my study I only concentrate on my study, suddenly, I feel that someone come to my room.* (concentrated) (felt) (came)

Example 2: *Then I knew the reality that my father is no more in this world.* (was)

Example 3: *All of us had great fun on the way to Murree we spend 3 hours there on the Mall road.* (spent)

**(3) Use of Past Tense instead of Present Tense:** students have used past form of verb instead of present. Whenever, we talk about our daily routine, habits or natural phenomena we use present tense but here respondents have used wrongly past tense instead of present. In the below mentioned, sentences spent, gave, felt and was, are all past forms of tense.

Example 1: *My favorite hobby is gardening and I spent most of my free time in nourishing plants.* (spend)

Example 2: *This is a hobby which does not disturb our studies or waste time but it gave knowledge.....* (give)

Example 3: *Books are my favorite hobby whenever I felt lonely.....* (feel)

Example 4: *Nowadays our political crisis was very high.* (are)

**(4) Spelling Errors:** students at postgraduate level also make many errors in spelling. Fagerberg (2006) deems that English spelling is a difficult matter, and learners throughout the world face difficulty in getting the letters right. So it is a natural that acquiring a second language errors making is indispensable. Even the native speakers are not free from this fact. Learners produce a large number of errors in their spelling while writing in spite drill and training.

Example 1: *So this is my hobby and I am prout of it.* (proud)

Example 2: *I use this habbit thrice a day.* (habit)

Example 3: *It always serves as a source of reaction.* (recreation)

Example 4: *People were asking us different questions on different ocassions.* (occasions)

**(5) Inappropriate usage of vocabulary:** A large number of students use inappropriate vocabulary in English composition. Vocabulary of any language is a precious treasure with the help of which a learner can show his expertise in the target language.

Example 1: *When my relatives come to my home I visit them to my garden.* (take)

Example 2: *Music not only soothes one's mind but also impacts the creativity.....* (affects)

Example 3: *Eventually I can say that gardening is a very good hobby.* (In a nutshell)

Example 4: *In the other hand reading of books is not much expensive.* (on)



**(6) Subject- Verb-Agreement:** The subject and the verb should agree in number and person. For correct composition of English, it is necessary that subject and verb should be optimal/agree. These kinds of errors have been found common among the participants. We cannot use the following pattern of sentences in proper writing; i.e. leaves gives us, reading give, some likes, hobbies makes, and four seasons all this kind of wording are improper and are against the rules of writing.

Example 1: *In summer season sun-rays reaches to.....(reach)*

Example 2: *These flowers and fresh green leaves gives us..... (give)*

Example 3: *Reading give me pleasure and happiness. (gives)*

Example 4: *I can prepare every things very good. (thing)*

Type of errors	Frequency					G-total
	1---3	4---6	7---9	10---12	13&abov	
Verb Tense	47 (52.22%)	12 (13.33%)	5 (5.55%)	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.1%)	66 (73.32%)
Spelling	50 (55.55%)	6 (6.66%)	----- (0%)	1 (1.1%)	----- (0%)	57 (63.33%)
Inappropriate use of vocabulary	44 (48.88%)	2 (2.22%)	----- (0%)	1 (1.1%)	----- (0%)	47 (52.21%)
Subject-verb- agreement	35 (38.88%)	9 (10%)	1 (1.1%)	----- (0%)	----- (0%)	45 (49.99%)

The above table illustrates that 52% students committed one to three errors while 13% students made four to six errors in the aspect of verb tense. Overall 73.32% students committed errors in the aspect of verb tense. Regarding spelling, 56% respondents made one to three errors while 7% students committed four to six errors on the whole 63.33% students committed errors regarding spelling. Forty nine percent (49%) students committed one to three vocabulary errors while 2% respondents committed four to six errors overall, 52.21% students used inappropriate vocabulary. Regarding Subject-verb-agreement, 39% students committed one to three errors while 10% respondents made three to six errors. On the whole 49.99% students made errors in the aspect of Subject-verb-agreement. From the above mentioned analysis, it can be inferred that students at MA level at English Departments in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa mostly committed errors in verb tense form, spelling, inappropriate use of vocabulary and Subject-verb- agreement.

## **Discussion**

In language learning errors committing is considered as an essential part and parcel of the process. So in the present study English writing of MA level learners was analyzed and the most common errors were identified and classified by the researchers. The most common errors recorded in the present study were classified into four types. Firstly, the verb tense errors which were further categorized into three sub-types; namely respondents used wrong form of verbs, they applied present tense instead of past or used past tense instead of present tense, 66 (73.32%) errors were found in the present study in this aspect of English composition. Lane and Lange (2011) assert that verb-tense errors are committed globally by English learners. Verb tenses play vital role in the sense of expressing the time in a sentence. As the time is a crucial factor in delivering a message. Second type of errors committed by majority of students was of spelling, 57 (63.33%). Spelling is one of the several English writing difficulties which L2 writer faces, including Pakistani students. Spelling is vital in view of the fact that one misspelling can alter the meaning that an author aimed to convey in the text (Fagerberg, 2006). Third type of errors that were committed by the respondents was use of inappropriate vocabulary. Forty seven respondents' (52.21%) errors were recorded regarding the usage of wrong vocabulary. Finally, the errors found most common among students were of subject/verb agreement. It is an important aspect of language writing which was found unsatisfactory among university students. Forty five students (50%) committed errors of subject-verb-agreement. The results of the present study show that many similar researches were conducted by experts and different types of errors were recorded in their studies. Kim (1987) the great expert of errors analysis conducted a study of 12th grade Korean students, English as Foreign Language and identified a total of 2455 errors in the English compositions. The results illustrated that errors in auxiliaries were the most common (419), prepositions (287) errors were found on second number. Duskova (1969) conducted a study on errors analysis in the composition of 50 Czech learners of English and identified a total of 1007 errors she categorized them into 9 categories. She found out errors in articles (260) were most frequent, followed by errors in lexis (233) while syntax errors were found (54) and only 31 errors in word order.

## Conclusion

The present study illustrates that majority of students commit a large number of errors in English composition. The most common errors recorded in the study were of four types namely: verb tense, spelling, inappropriate use of vocabulary and subject-verb-agreement. The most common and frequent errors committed by majority of the respondents have been noted down and presented. It can be concluded that students make a large number of errors in their English composition even at this higher level of learning. Their writing skills were not at satisfactory level in L2.

## Recommendations

- (i) Teachers should give feedback to students' written assignments on regular basis as Lee (2004) study shows that most of the time students depend on teachers for the correction of errors in improving their L2 writing accuracy. In L2 writing learners expect, value, and want teachers' feedback (Komura, 1999). To provide feedback on students' writing in L2 is the most significant way of improving their writing accuracy (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, Brown, 2007).
- (ii) Teachers should specify the differentiation between English (L2) and Urdu (L1) grammar, to avoid language interference and for a more effective impact in learning English language.
- (iii) Teachers should encourage learners in developing a positive attitude towards English language.
- (iv) As modern strategies of language teaching, rules should be taught implicitly and remedial programs that can improve students' communicative competence especially in writing should be designed.

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