Tertiary Students' Grammatical Errors: A Small-scale Empirical Study

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Abstract

This is a qualitative study aimed at finding out the grammatical error type and analyzing sources of the errors made by the students of the first semester, B. A. (Hons.) in English of the English Department of a university in Bangladesh. English is taught as a compulsory subject in Bangladesh from primary school to college. Despite learning English for about 12 years, students still make grammatical errors in their writing at the tertiary level. Limited studies have appeared on the grammatical errors made by tertiary students in their writings. This study deals with the grammatical errors made by 15 students in the first semester, B. A. (Hons.) in English in their paragraph writing. The paragraphs they produced in their mid-term examination were used as a sample for data collection and analyzed using content analysis approach. The outcomes revealed that their grammatical knowledge is not up to the mark, resulting in grammatical errors. The identified errors were categorized into seven categories as subject-verb agreement, nouns, adjectives, prepositions, articles, spellings and capitalizations. Their most frequent errors were spelling, followed by subject-verb agreement errors. These findings concluded that teachers should provide detailed and corrective feedback and use effective strategies to prevent students from making such grammatical errors.

Key Words: Grammatical Errors, Grammatical Knowledge, L1 Interference, Teacher Feedback, Error Analysis.

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Introduction

The world knows how important language's role is in Bangladeshis' hearts and minds. In 1952, Students sacrificed their lives to establish their mother tongue. Learning Second Language does not mean avoiding or disrespecting the mother language. To keep pace with the modern world, proficiency in English is a must. In this era of development, none can hold a farm and leading position without Excellency in English. Francis Bacon claims, "Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man and writing an exact man". Here, by saying 'writing makes an exact man; Bacon implies that writing may contribute to making people 'exact' or 'precise'.

Nowadays, many companies seek candidates who are experts in maintaining many types of organizational communication such as presentations, reports, emails, sales materials, visual aids etc., that denote the excellence of English writing skills. Grammar is one of the most influential aspects of learning a language. The grammar of a language includes essential parts such as the existence of tenses, verbs, articles and adjectives and their order, how questions are phrased and much more. Samuel Kirkham, the author of one of the best-selling grammar books in nineteenth-century America, defines grammar as "The art of speaking and writing the English language with property". Further, he said, "In every situation, under all circumstances, on all occasions: when you speak, read, write or think a knowledge of grammar is an essential utility".

On the part of students, writing is viewed as a complicated and challenging task. Students express their thoughts and ideas through their writings. Students' writings need to be checked by teachers. Teachers correct them, which is viewed as a loaded work. Often it requires allocating extra time to correct the errors and returns those with feedback. If a teacher corrects the errors during and after the writing process immediately, students can better understand the sources of mistakes made.

Error analysis can express what aspects of grammar are challenging for the learners, and obtaining feedback stimulates their new attempt to approximate the target language successfully. In his paper, Myles (2002, p. 9) said, "Although reading an error-filled text can be tiring and disconcerting, errors can help us identify the cognitive strategies that the learner is using to process

information." So, this study aims at examining and categorizing common errors found in writing. The research objective is to find the answer to the following question:

What types of grammatical errors are committed by the students of the first semester in their paragraph writing?

Literature Review

Students cannot produce good writing if they have inadequate grammatical knowledge. Richards and Renandya (2002) state, "Writing is a complex process, and it consists of many constituent parts, and we need to consider which ones will be the most important for a course: content, organization, originality, style, fluency, accuracy or using appropriate rhetorical forms of discourse". In written approaches, grammatical errors can change the meaning conveyed. Jenwithinsuk (2009, p. 2) notes in his study, "Accuracy in the use of the language guarantees the better understanding between the sender and the receiver of the message. On the other hand, errors may cause misunderstanding, or even communication breaks down". According to an ad for an "amazing book" on usage, "Mistakes in English can cause you embarrassment, hold you back socially and on the job. It can make you awkward and hide your true intellect. Next, Brown (2000, p. 225-226) said, "A study of the speech and writing of learners is largely the study of learners' errors. "Correct" production yields little information about the actual linguistic system of learners, only information about the target language system that learners have already acquired".

Similarly, Ellis (2008) and James (1998) emphasized that errors are unnoticeable points for L2 learners. They reflect the gaps in the learner's knowledge because they cannot identify if the errors are correct or incorrect. The errors occur finally based on the severity of errors affecting communication. Brut (1975, p. 8-9) categorized errors into "Global" and "Local errors". Global errors "affect overall sentence organization and significantly hinder communication." where Local errors "affect a single element (a constituent) in the sentence and usually do not hinder communication". According to Corder (1981, p. 5-6), "There have been two schools of thought in respect of learners' errors. Firstly, the school maintains that if we were to

achieve a perfect teaching method, the errors would never be committed in the first place and therefore, the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of our teaching technique. The philosophy of the second school is that we live in an imperfect world and consequently errors will always occur in spite of our best efforts".

Error Analysis is one of the most influential theories of second language acquisition to study errors made by students. Error Analysis is different from error correction. Error analysis was established by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues' in1967. EA can discover good, appropriate and corrective techniques. The reason behind it is that through writing, one can evaluate language competency and capability to recall and think. In a study, P. Sobahle (1986, p. 25) states, "Error analysis is the study of errors made by a group of people who shared the same mother tongue when studying a second or third language. It consists of all the errors made that are peculiar to that group of people".

Next, Ellis (as cited in Ping Wang, 2008) viewed "EA as being based on the emergency of intra-language theory, which is known to be used to explain effectively the errors committed in second language acquisition process". Corder (1967, p. 19-27) illustrates that those errors are "important in and of themselves". In his opinion, the significance of EA is emphasized. He elucidated EA in his article entitled "The significance of learner errors". (1967). Further, he demonstrates that learners' errors are significant in three ways. First to the teacher, they tell him if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and what remains for him to learn. Secondly, they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly, (and in a sense, this is their most important aspect) they are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses to learn. It is a way the learner has of testing his hypothesis about the nature of the language he is learning.

Between the 1940s to 1970s, Contrastive Analysis became extremely popular. The contrastive Analysis Hypothesis was formulated in Lado's Linguistics Across Cultures (1957). In this book, Lado (1957, p. 2) explains, "those elements which are similar to the learner's native language will be simple for

him, and those elements that are different will be difficult". While this was not a novel suggestion, Lado was the pioneer who provided comprehensive theoretical treatment and suggested a systematic set of technical procedures for the contrastive study of languages. According to contrastive analysis theory, teachers do contrastive analysis between the native language and the target language to predict the learning problems that will be faced by the students.

Learners' errors are a part of their learning process, and their error occurrence proves they are on the right track. Now this research investigates the possible reasons for their error occurrences. As Bangla (L1) and English (L2) are two different languages, their grammar is also different. Students commit errors when they transfer the grammatical rules of Bangla to English. It often happens. They create an intermediate grammar that is neither similar to Bangla nor English while learning a second language and commit errors. This intermediate grammar is called "Interlanguage grammar", and such errors are called "Interlingual errors".

Though Weinreich introduced it in 1953, many linguists, for example, Selinker (1969, 1972), Corder (1967), and Brown (2000) discussed it later. They all agree that there is a psychological structure latent in the brain. It reveals its existence while learning a second language. The term "interlanguage" shifted the psychological perspective of second language learning from a behaviourist to a mentalist one. Later on, this term gets named differently "Approximative System" by Nemser (1911), "Transitional Competence" and "Idiosyncratic Dialect" by Corder (1967, 1981). Interlingual errors (Brown, 2000) and "Intralingual and Developmental errors" (Richard, 1971) are two significant sources of error in second language learning. Interlingual error results from transfer from the mother tongue, called "Interference ". Students try to generalize their knowledge of L1 and experiences of L2 in learning the target language. Contrastive Analysis (CA) was based on the related theory of language transfer. Brown (2000, p. 97) states, "Negative Transfer occurs when previous performance disrupts the performance of a second task. The latter can be referred to as ' interference ' in that previously learned material interferes with a subsequent material; a previous item is incorrectly transferred or incorrectly associated with an item to be learned".

Richards (1971) proposed other possible sources of errors. He concluded that several types of errors are caused by the difficulty in the language itself and the immaturity of learner acquisition which in his term is called intralingual and developmental errors. Richards (1970, p.6) describes four causes of error occurrence of students. They are Overgeneralization, Ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concept hypothesized. Overgeneralization covers instances where the learner creates deviant structures in the target language. Ignorance of rule restrictions refers to the failure to observe the restrictions of existing structures, that is, the application of rules to the context where they do not apply. Incomplete application of rules refers to structures whose deviancy represents the degree of development of the rules required to produce acceptable utterances. False concept hypothesized refers to a class of developmental errors derived from the faulty comparison of distinction in the target language".

Similarly, Selinker (1972, p. 215) states five psychological processes for error occurrences. They are Language transfer, Transfer of training, Strategies of second language learning, Strategies of second language communication, and Overgeneralization.

Methodology

These parts address the research design, participants, instruments, data collection and data analysis procedure.

Research Design

The researcher conducted this study based on a qualitative design. Fifteen written paragraphs were collected, and the grammatical errors were investigated. The writings were analyzed using content analysis.

Research Instruments

A research instrument is used to collect information to answer the research questions. Instruments facilitate the data collection procedure, and here students' written paragraphs were used as an instrument.

Participants

The participants in the study were 15 students of 1st semester studying BA (Hons) in English. Their age range was between 18-20 years, and they all studied English as a compulsory subject for 12 years, from primary to higher secondary level.

Data collection

The author collected the mid-term scripts of a course assigned to her named "Fundamentals of English I". In the composition part, they were told to write any one paragraph from the given two. The author needed to ask for permission from the chairman of the department of English to have those scripts for this analysis purpose.

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure was followed using these steps- identifying, classifying, quantifying, and analyzing errors. Errors were identified compared with their correct form and classified into seven categories. Then to quantify errors, the frequencies of each error were numbered in percentage. Descriptive statistical analysis was applied to form the bar chart. Lastly, to find out the reasons the errors were analyzed.

Findings

The students of the first semester have made some grammatical errors categorized into seven fields. They are spelling errors, sub-verb agreement errors, noun errors, article errors, preposition errors, adjective errors and capitalization. The students have difficulty using the right form of verb. First, they face problems in choosing appropriate verbs according to the subject. The singular verb will follow the singular subject, and the plural verb will follow the plural subject. In their writing, for plural subjects, they are foundtouse singular verbs like- one participant uses the singular verb 'is" for the plural subject "half of the people of our country". The correct form will be plural verb "are". Another participant uses the singular verb "goes" for plural subject

"students". Plural verb "go" will be the correct form. Secondly, the gerund form is misused. Thirdly, they are weak in the usage of passive forms of verbs. Fourthly, they misuse verbs in context. Lastly, for their lack of knowledge, they omit verbs. Their grammatical errors are shown below.

Type	Example
Misuse of verbs	• Half of the people of our country are women. • Students goes to school, college.
Misuse of gerund	• In the morning, you find people walk. • By judge everything, I can say that city life is comfortable.
Misuse of passive forms of verbs	• About female education, this idea has changed but fate is not change. • Female education must need to develop a nation.
Misuse verbs in context	• Education is the backbone of a nation. We believe this line, but we do not work this.
Omission of verbs	• The people of the city do not enjoy life. • Our women lagging behind.

Table-1: Errors of using verb

In the usages of the noun, students find the problem in identifying singular and plural forms and misusing noun forms when it is not required. They face problems in differentiating between singular nouns and plural nouns. The singular subject will be followed by a singular verb, and the plural subject will be followed by a plural subject. Additionally, they tend to use noun forms where they should not.

Type	Examples
Confusion of singular and plural forms	• Now female are participating in the development of our country. • Village are made by God.
Misuse of noun form	• Female education is very important for every nation. • City men and rural men are very different.

Table-2: Errors of using nouns

In table-3, their mistakes in placing the article are given below. They misused placing articles according to rules, and then they used articles when it was not necessary. When the first letter of a word is a vowel, it is to use the indefinite article "an", whereas a word beginning with a consonant sound will carry the indefinite article "a" before it. This reveals their carelessness, along with their lack of knowledge.

Type	Example
Misuse of article	• Give me a educated mother. I will give you a educated nation. • Facebook is an social networking service.
Redundant use of article	• A city life is an very modern. • City life has a some disadvantages.

Table-3: Errors of using the article

While putting prepositions, students sometimes misused, redundantly used. Surprisingly, sometimes they missed placing prepositions. Students are seen to

be unconcerned about the preposition usage, and they do not even think that prepositions are to be used consciously. Misuse of phrases and idioms is also included in table no 4.

Type	Example
Misuse of preposition	• The people do not have time of family. • Poverty, illiteracy, religion etc. are the main barriers to female education.
Misusing preposition	• When a baby is born, mother always takes care.
Misuse of phrase and idiom	• An educated mother can teach the baby for good.

Table-4: Errors of using the preposition

Students' other two areas of making grammatical errors are adjectives and capitalization. Students should not ignore the importance of capitalization, and they are shown in Tables-5 and 6.

Type	Example
Misuse of determiner	• She was very busy for their job. • Some people are busy with their business.
Misuse of obj. form	• There should be no different of opinion regarding imparting education to women.

Table-5: Errors of using adjectives

Type	Example
However, using small letters at the beginning of a sentence	• female education is crucial for a nation. • city life is really different form village life.

Table-6: Errors of capitalization

In the findings, students also made mistakes in using conjunction and pronoun. Nevertheless, they are a few.

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Spelling	67	33.5%
S-V-Agreement	56	28%
Noun	22	11%
Article	17	8.5%
Preposition	12	6%
Adjective	8	4%
Capitalization	7	3.5%
Others	11	5.5%
Total	200	100%

Figure-1: Frequency of grammatical errors

The figure shows that the grammatical errors were categorized into seven categories: Sub-verb agreement, Noun, Article, Preposition, Adjective, Capitalization and Spelling. The analysis proves that 67 (33.5%) were spelling

errors, whereas 56 (28%) were sub-verb agreements. The sub-verb agreement held second place. After that, noun errors were 22 (11%), followed by article 17 (8.5%). It is followed by errors in adjective 8 (4%) and capitalization 7 (3.5%). Other 11 (5.5%) were errors of pronoun, conjunction, and omission of words. They are presented in the form of bar & pie charts in Figures-2 & 3.

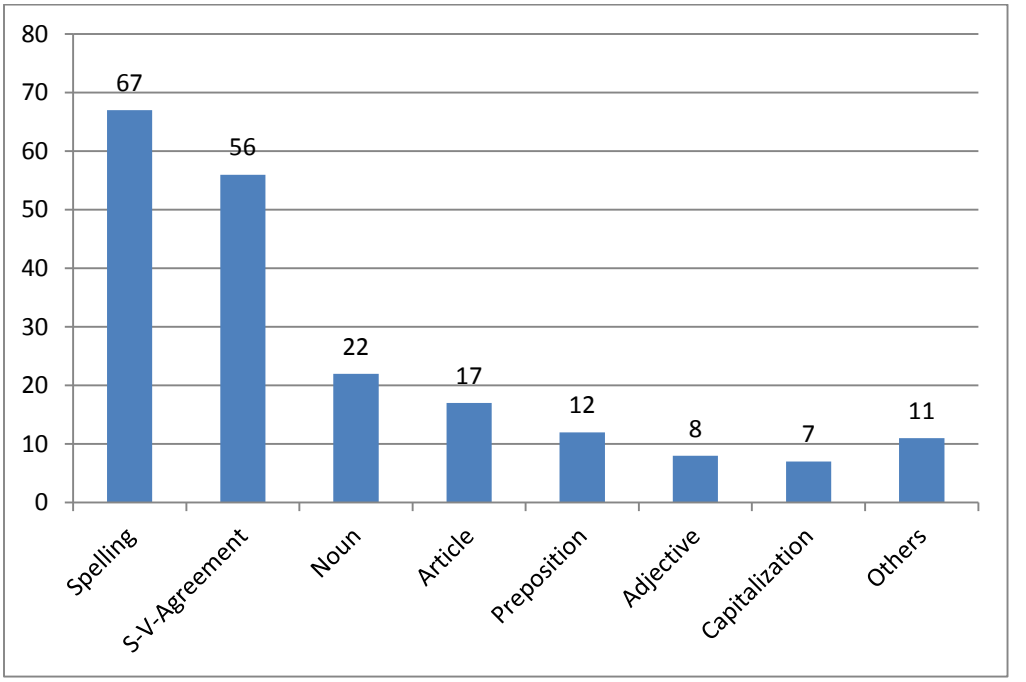


Figure-2: Frequency of grammatical error bar chart

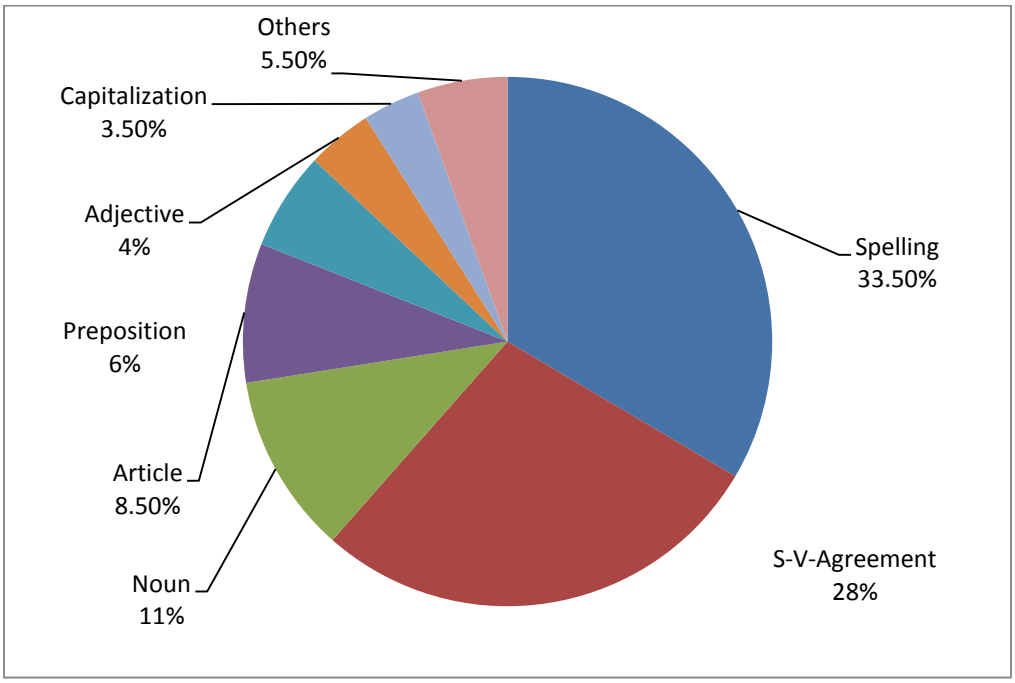


Figure-3: Percentage of the grammatical error pie chart

Discussion

After collecting the data and identifying them, the study's findings reveal that the students' grammatical knowledge in the first semester is very poor. Despite learning English at the primary, secondary and higher secondary levels, they still have problems, and thus grammatical errors have been found in their writing. Charanjit Kaur Swaran Singh (2017, p. 10) also found these types of grammatical errors. In her research, the most prominent error done by the students is the subject-verb agreement which is found to be the second prominent error done by students in this study. In both studies, students face problems in using the right form of verbs according to the demand of the subject. While constructing a sentence, the subject is followed by the verb. Students' lack of knowledge makes them trouble identifying the correct number of the subject. Not to be surprised, sometimes they make this mistake reversely. In this study, students misused verbs in the context, which was not common in Charanjit Kaur's study. In her study, students are found to misuse auxiliary

verbs. In this study, rather than improper use, they skipped auxiliary verbs. Students' lack of adequate grammatical knowledge is the reason for such occurrences in writing. Compared to the study of Charanjit Kaur regarding the findings of noun use, students could not differentiate between countable and uncountable nouns.

In contrast, in this study, students use nouns where they should not. In both cases, it reveals the shortage of grammatical knowledge. The application of appropriate prepositions is a common problem faced by the students in her study. According to Charanjit Kaur, for the students, prepositions do not affect the meaning of their sentences. I also believe that this is the probable reason for their indifference to appropriate prepositions in the sentences. To talk about spelling errors, due to the lack of proper knowledge, students are prone to produce incorrect spellings. In this study, spelling mistakes are dominant in the students' writing. Other mistakes like misplacement of articles, incorrect use of determiners and capitalizations are also noticeable. The analysis of the students' grammatical errors revealed that these students have a poor command of English. Errors are expected in the learning process, and it is essential to identify the reasons for them. The reasons for it are understandable. The students of Bangladesh primarily develop a negative attitude towards English from their childhood. They do not get interested in learning it. They only learn to pass the examination. Sometimes students have a fearful feeling, and they are less interested in writing classes. Their fear prevents them from participating actively in the class. Thus, this made them unconfident and prevented them from producing good writing. This study revealed that their errors are more frequent at the word level than at the sentence level. If we compare learning the English language to building a structure, we will find that a strong foundation is mandatory in both cases. A weak foundation can cause downfall.

Similarly, students must be conscious of studying the English language from the very beginning of their education. If a student has difficulty in alphabet level, he or she will also face difficulty forming words. Furthermore, difficulty in word formations will lead him to form improper sentence constructions. That student will face problems in the application of the English language not only in writing but also in speaking. Consequently, these become barriers to learning the language effectively. L1 interference is one of the leading causes, as also

claimed by Derakhshan (2015). Bangla and English both languages have different grammatical structures. Students cannot restrain their rules and knowledge of L1. The grammatical knowledge of L1 confuses them while producing writing in L2. They might transfer the rules, word orders and structures of L1 into English writing.

Overgeneralization is also seen in students' errors. They apply rules where the rules even do not need to be applied. Students tend to ignore grammatical rules where necessary as they are unaware of the rules and restrictions. Errors occur when students fail to learn more complex rules, and they think they can succeed in producing effective language using simple rules they learnt; thus, incomplete application of rules causes errors. False or wrong concepts about the target language can hinder the learning process of students. Such misconceptions often work as a barrier to comprehending distinctions in the target language and cause errors. Lado (1957) formulated contrastive analysis that has proved valuable in locating areas of interlanguage interference. Deficient strategies applied by teachers in teaching and strategies applied by students in learning are accountable for causing such errors. Along with these, overgeneralization and ignorance of rule restrictions also cause errors.

Recommendations

After knowing the students' errors, the author would like to recommend some ways to eliminate the students' errors. They are:

The English teacher who teaches a particular course should have adequate knowledge of both L1 and L2 to provide proper guidelines. If the teacher can understand and identify the students' weaknesses and errors in writing, he can employ practical approaches and methods to overcome those. In this case, 'needs analysis' can play a vital role. Need analysis finds out the weaknesses of the students. Through need analysis, the problems the students are facing in the class get revealed, and thus it helps the teachers to understand the problems. According to the needs of the students, teachers should give feedback and conduct the classes. Knowing the problems will make it easier for teachers to deal with. The teacher should motivate the students to overcome their fear regarding writing. For this, teachers are to be provided with training and enough seminars. If teachers are well trained, they can make their class environment

effective for learning and enjoyable for the students. Teachers should be trained to use effective teaching strategies such as writing conferences, grammar mini-lessons, partnership writing and peer response.

Students should practice more and more to have proficiency in grammar and writing. The more they practice, the more efficient they will become. The students can develop their writing knowledge if they pay more sincere attention. Students should realize the importance of using correct grammar. Appropriate feedback and explanation of the errors made by the students can enhance students' writing skills. Appropriate feedback can make students recognize their grammatical errors and help them to raise their awareness of producing meaningful text.

Conclusion

The study represents an analysis of grammatical errors made in the writing of 1st-semester students of tertiary level. Therefore, the outcomes reveal their frequent errors in spellings, sub-verb agreements, nouns, articles, adjectives and capitalization. This study identifies the reasons for such occurrences of errors. Since this study was conducted on a very small scale, the results are pretty significant. This is an undeniable fact that our students only learn English to pass the examination. For this, they tend to memorize answers. Thus, they get stuck when it is time to apply their learnt language knowledge. This is also true that there is a shortage of skilled and trained English teachers in Bangladesh. Mostly, teachers are not well informed, potential, well versed, and well equipped here. As a result, they cannot apply suitable approaches to teaching. At each level, some teachers still give notes and motivate students to memorize those, providing suggestions for the examination. During the examination, students answer the questions from their memory. This also seemed to be a significant problem. Our existing examination process, evaluation and assessment process, moreover syllabus design somehow force our students to choose the path of memorization rather than comprehending the language. So, proper guidelines, training sessions, and gateway for research should be given to our teachers. Though they are few, some dedicated teachers will also be found who passionately try to develop the inner capacity and bring out the creativity of the students. Regrettably, they cannot proceed much due to the established evaluation system. The syllabus and assessment process should be

improved to facilitate the students learning process rather than memorization. The students should practise more and more to overcome their errors. They should be more careful about grammar.

Moreover, the teachers' feedback should be positive and corrective regarding the errors, and students should go for rewriting after getting feedback from the teachers. Above all, modern facilities like computers, projection, and multimedia classrooms can also play a vital role in language learning. The author hopes that teachers and syllabus designers will benefit from this study's results to design and develop more suitable teaching materials and techniques.

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