

Improving academic writing skill: Difficulties encountered by undergraduates of English studies in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Bangladeshi students of English programs encounter some barriers in their attempt to develop academic writing skill at undergraduate level. The majority of the students who study in English programs in Bangladesh receive their primary and secondary schooling in the instruction medium of Bangla, while a few percent in English medium and English version instructions. Testing and assessment in English studies predominantly focuses on academic writing skill and many students cut a sorry figure in formative and summative assessments in the very first semester due to poor writing competence. This study examined two issues: the difficulties that Bangladeshi undergraduates of English studies confront while developing academic writing skill, and the ways to develop L2 English writing skill. Participants of this study were 6 students studying English in different Bangladeshi universities and 3 English teachers who were teaching at tertiary level. Data collection tools were composition writing samples on a selected topic for undergraduates and a semi-structured interview schedule for teachers. Results indicated that poor grammatical competence and brainstorming skill, insufficient vocabulary, inadequate knowledge of mechanics and writing style, and mother tongue interference were the major

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barriers that Bangladeshi undergraduates of English studies frequently faced while writing in English.

Keywords: *Academic writing; Difficulties; Assessment; English study; Bangladesh*

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the language skills that requires considerable effort to develop and the EFL learners encounter many challenges while developing writing skill (Salma, 2015). Extensive research works have been conducted on different aspects of L2 writing skill (Jeyaraj, 2020; Mansour, 2020; Hong et al., 2020; Wang, 2020; Navidinia et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2020) including the challenges faced by ESL/EFL learners (Anh, 2019; Fadda, 2012; Karim et al., 2017; Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016; Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014) and the ways to develop this skill (Akhiar et al., 2017; Correia, 2006; Setyowati & Widiati, 2014; Carter, 2015) by researchers in different contexts.

Hundreds of students take admission in BA (Honors) programs in English at private universities, public universities and national university affiliated colleges in Bangladesh after being qualified in a competitive admission test. Additionally, these students must have good academic standing in both secondary and higher secondary examinations as per the Bangladeshi education system. Notwithstanding their academic merit, students with poor writing competence usually cut a sorry figure in the mid-term examinations (formative assessments) and semester final examinations (summative assessments) and thus they often become demotivated.

In Bangladeshi universities, the medium of instruction in undergraduate English studies programs is English. Therefore, English writing skill is very important for the undergraduate students since the assessment system is based on written examinations in English. To improve students' English competence, basic English language courses are offered in the first semester of the BA (Honors) program for improving four skills in English- listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Although some of the students are found with improved proficiency in the second semester, many of them still struggle to survive in the program and cut a sorry figure in the subsequent semesters which results in an unsatisfactory CGPA at the end of the bachelor program.

This research is important because the findings and recommendations of this study might benefit English studies programs in Bangladesh. Thus, it is particularly potential for the university teachers of English studies programs, students, language teaching professionals, curriculum developers, University Grants Commission of Bangladesh, and other concerned stakeholders. The goal of this study is to examine the difficulties which Bangladeshi undergraduates of English studies experience while developing academic writing skill. It will also investigate and propose ways to facilitate teaching and learning of writing skill for Bangladeshi undergraduates of English studies.

2. Literature review

2.1. English learners' difficulties in academic writing

Academic writing is different from everyday use of language, so most of the L2 English learners face problems in academic writing. Fadda (2012) reported the difficulties and problems that the postgraduate ESL learners face in academic writing. Findings demonstrated that students encountered difficulties in differentiating between spoken and written, and formal and informal English (Fadda, 2012). As part of the solution, Mansour (2020) placed particular emphasis on memorization of frequently used phrasal verbs as the EFL learners learned vocabulary in a study conducted at an Iraqi university that included 50 participants majoring in English. A similar study was conducted by Anh (2019) on the challenges in writing skills that the EFL students confronted and the remedies of those challenges. According to the findings of the study, the major problems that EFL learners encounter in writing are limited knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, lack of proper writing knowledge and so on. Additionally, this study added that students experienced challenges due to unplanned course materials, inappropriate teaching strategies, influence of mother tongue, lack of practice, lack of seriousness and responsibility of the students. In a similar direction, Jeyaraj (2020) carried out a study on writing needs with six postgraduate research students in Malaysia. Academic writing, supervision and ICT were three significant areas identified in this study in which the research students needed assistance. Participants in this study considered academic English crucial to develop writing skill. Thus, the three streams namely English for General Purposes, English for Academic Purposes, and English for Occupational Purposes need to be addressed specifically in order to develop learners' writing competence.

Bangladeshi EFL learners encounter a number of barriers while composing a piece of writing in English be it a paragraph or an essay. Karim et al. (2017) conducted a study on 43 participants who were majoring in English language and literature at a Bangladeshi university and investigated the challenges that Bangladeshi EFL learners faced while writing paragraphs. They examined three stages (planning, writing and revising) in paragraph writing and found that the most challenging stage for Bangladeshi EFL learners was the writing stage. While writing a piece, they experienced major challenges in using idioms, appropriate vocabulary and antonyms. Similarly, Afrin (2016) conducted a study regarding English writing problems of non-English major undergraduates on 89 participants at a private university in Bangladesh. This study found that the main issues that non-English major students encountered were grammatical incompetence, insufficient practice, insufficient motivation and their varied educational backgrounds. In a similar study, Patwary and Sajib (2018) investigated the processes that L2 English learners involved in academic writing, the standard processes that should be followed and their familiarity with different concepts of writing skill. Results demonstrated that the majority of students had inadequate knowledge in writing processes

and techniques. It also reported that students were more concerned with grammatical and mechanical aspects of writing skill that often stopped them improving their writing skill.

Grammar is an integral aspect in second language learning. Marjokorpi (2023) investigated the statistical relationship between grammatical understanding and writing skill in the Finnish context. It reported a strong correlation between grammatical understanding and quality of students' writing (e.g., stylistic, syntactic, genre-related). It also reported that less complex vocabulary was a characteristic of less proficient writers. Mohammad and Hazarika (2016) conducted a study on 50 Arabian EFL learners of a Saudi Arabian university on proper use of capitalization, punctuation, grammar/language use and spelling and pointed out that the major challenges to develop writing competence were memorization of selected topics, lack of self-awareness of the errors, insufficient background knowledge in English, mother tongue interference etc. Hong et al. (2020) conducted research on the problems that Malaysian secondary students faced in writing English. They concentrated on error analysis in essay writing like error in the use of subject-verb-agreement and copula be. The research was conducted on 32 Malay lower secondary school students from a rural school in Malaysia and found that lower secondary students committed many errors namely omission, overinclusion, misselection, and blend errors in their writing.

2.2. Importance of higher order thinking in L2 English writing

The correlation between writing skill and higher order thinking skills was investigated in Singh et al. (2020) who argued that teachers' role was paramount in developing learners' higher-order thinking skills (HOTs). HOTs such as problem-solving skills, comparing and contrasting, reasoning, using i-Think maps and graphic organizers, inferring, connecting between concepts, brainstorming, paraphrasing, providing examples, analyzing, and questioning were very effective in developing ESL writing skill (Singh et al., 2020). This study asserted that teachers could transform learners into independent critical thinkers using HOTs and it would enhance learner autonomy as well.

The development of critical reading skills is important in order to develop academic writing skills. Correia (2006) asserted that critical reading could make students active readers. Active reading activities are book reviews writing, summary writing, note-taking, creating diagrams, filling in tables etc. These tasks have superior potential for learning and require enthusiastic student participation. It also required activation of background knowledge (Alderson 1984 as quoted in Correia 2006) while reading a text. On the other hand, passive reading tasks like reading comprehension activities (dictionary work-locating synonyms/antonyms, vocabulary, gap-filling exercises, multiple-choice exercises, true-false statements), learners cannot decipher the meaning at a deeper level rather they understand it at the superficial level. Passive reading behavior is enhanced in activities like multiple-choice items, true-false statements, and vocabulary items.

There are some writing prompts that usually cause extra pressure on learners' cognition which ultimately lead to construction of less complex clauses and sentences in

writing and those EFL learners might be underestimated in educational assessments. Therefore, the testers and language teachers need to be cautious while selecting writing prompts considering the EFL learners' psychology. Wang (2020) investigated the relationship between sentimentality and syntactic complexity in L2 writing in a corpus-based study of Chinese EFL writers. Wang (2020) argued that there was a crucial connection between psychological state and EFL writing. MacDuff et al. (2010) discussed students' unwillingness, fear, indifference and diffidence to write anything and it also added that an effective activity that teachers could involve was the use of "I-can statements" or "I will statements".

2.3. Tools and techniques in L2 English writing

Brainstorming, prewriting, and peer work help students gather and exchange ideas while developing writing skill. Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) found that students followed some prewriting strategies- they wrote something in Arabic and later translated it in English. Majority of the students felt comfortable with this strategy compared to brainstorming and outlining. Brittain (2019) concentrated on the importance of prewriting and brainstorming in EFL writing classroom. Brittain (2019) asserted that it was difficult to start writing anything, so brainstorming was important to amalgamate ideas. He further added that students faced difficulties (e.g., lack of ideas, vocabularies, content) when they were asked to write something.

Salas et al. (2016) argued that freewriting and meaning-making-process helped students develop their comprehensive skill and writing strategy in EFL secondary classrooms. Literature does not have any fixed or concrete explanation, when reading any poem or any other literary genre, students can engage themselves in the meaning-making process. Thus, they can write their own perception and understanding to explain any piece of literature. Moiseenko (2015) raised the question of the significance of learner-generated materials. He talked about the importance of students' creativity and capability to generate learning materials for them. In this way, they found enough motivation and enthusiasm to learn new things and a more polished language. Moiseenko (2015) further asserted that teachers should appreciate the works of the students such as stories, essays, dramas, and poems to motivate them. Schlight (2020) shed light on the use of proper register and deference in formal and informal contexts highlighting several contexts of written communication, especially email communication. The nature of salutation and language writers should use was his main focus. The use of register and deference varies according to contexts and it is important for EFL learners to know these variations.

In order to create meaningful texts, structure and organization of the text is very important. Coherence is considered to be a crucial characteristic in L2 writing (Lee, 2002). As per the researchers, L2 English learners paid more attention to vocabulary and syntax while writing and their focus on textual coherence was insignificant (Bamberg, 1984; Ferris & Hedgecock, 1998 as found in Lee, 2002). Guban (2014) found that grammar was not the main ornament of writing; rather, the cohesion of writing in a

paragraph was more important. If students write cohesively with few grammatical errors, it does not cause any serious problem for the readers to understand the content. Otherwise, if there is no structure of the writing, only grammatical accuracy is not helpful for good comprehension.

Pictures, visual cues, photos, cartoons, diagrams, images, and digital visuals might be employed in English writing instruction. Navidinia et al. (2018) investigated the significance of using pictures in teaching writing skill in a study of 34 participants in an EFL context. The study concluded that the use of pictures in the instruction brought positive effects on EFL learners' word range, grammatical accuracy and use of cohesive devices in writing skill. Akhiar et al. (2017) conducted a study on learner perception and attitude regarding the use of Instagram in ESL writing and the findings represented that social media provided mobility, accessibility, social connectivity and contextualization in language learning. Similar social media like Facebook, and YouTube have been considered effective in ESL pedagogy in several studies.

Carter (2015) described the technique of using five senses of human beings (touch, see, smell, hear, and taste) to gather ideas for writing. He talked about the importance of visual imagery and visualization to obtain ideas and motivation for writing. Students could be asked to visualize any event or thing of their personal life or daily activities to write down on it. Carter (2015) further described the way of the development of descriptive writing through story-telling activity and visualization in the classroom. Students can listen to the story carefully and visualize their own feelings and emotions regarding a story.

2.4. Role of feedback in improving L2 English writing skill

Feedback is very effective in developing EFL learners' writing skill and it enhances learner motivation. Ganapathy et al. (2020) conducted research on the importance of teachers' written corrective feedback for secondary ESL students in Malaysia. The major finding of this study demonstrated that most of the students wanted feedback from their instructors since it was an opportunity to understand errors that they made. Rukanuddin et al. (2021) asserted that feedback was crucial in teaching-learning and learners should be provided with feedback on their learning activities by the teachers in the shortest possible time. They argued that the feedback of formative assessments should be delivered within the shortest possible time. Diab (2006) investigated the preferences of the instructors and students while correcting errors and providing feedback in a study of 14 female EFL instructors. Surface-level error correction was considered to be insignificant and suggested to avoid in a second language writing classroom (Huntley, 1992; Truscott, 1996 as found in Diab, 2006). Here explicit error or surface-level error refers to the errors of spelling, grammar and mechanics. Moreover, feedback on content and organization facilitated student writing (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Huntley, 1992; Kepner, 1991 as found in Diab, 2006).

2.5. Genre-based L2 English writing

Teachers could enhance learner enthusiasm, their environmental consciousness and contextualization and interaction for successful language learning by integrating ecological issues in language teaching curriculum (Hauschild et al., 2012 as found in Setyowati & Widiati, 2014). Setyowati and Widiati (2014) advocated the incorporation of environmental education in the teaching and learning of genre-based EFL writing which was considered very prospective on account of the learning outcomes- developing writing skill and environmental awareness simultaneously. Tardy (2010) presented the approach of writing an article for Wikipedia, especially appropriate for undergraduate students to develop their academic writing. In addition to selecting vocabulary and syntactic structures, students had to learn researching, summarizing, paraphrasing, citing, and adopting genre-specific guidelines in order to make their writing less subjective and more formal (Tardy, 2010). Suastra and Menggo (2020) reported that performance assessment enhanced students' writing skill while developing their self-esteem and motivation simultaneously.

Overall, this literature review has revealed that academic writing skill in a second or foreign language is shaped by a number of factors which include teaching approaches and methods, learner motivation, learner autonomy, emotional state, teaching materials, feedback, and educational technology that have been investigated by researchers. Based on the literature review, this study addressed the following research questions:

- a. What are the difficulties that Bangladeshi undergraduates of English studies encounter while improving academic writing skill?
- b. Are there any ways to facilitate teaching and learning of academic writing skill for Bangladeshi undergraduates of English studies?

3. Method

The nature of the study was qualitative. Qualitative data were collected with writing samples and semi-structured interviews. The research design of the study is as follows:

Table 1

Research design of the study.

Research tools	Respondent	Nature of data	Sample	Sampling Procedure	Mode of analysis	Approach of analysis
Descriptive composition writing in English	Students (3 female, 3 male)	Qualitative	2x3= 6	Purposive	Organizing, Identifying	Thematic analysis

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule	Teachers (2 female, 1 male)	Qualitative	1x3= 3	Purposive
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3.1. Participants

Participants of this study were nine Bangladeshi L2 English learners and teachers (six undergraduate students and three university teachers). Two undergraduates (one male, one female) and one teacher from a private, a public and a national university affiliated college were selected for this study. The students were studying in the BA (Honors) program in English who were taught by these teacher participants. Student participants received twelve years of education in Bangla-medium instruction before taking admission in the bachelor program. Teachers graduated with an MA in English from public universities of Bangladesh and they ranged in teaching experience from one to seven years. One of the teachers completed online teacher training on educational technology and language teaching methodology from three US universities.

3.2. Data collection procedures

Student participants were tasked with writing a descriptive composition titled “Difficulties that you face in freehand English writing”. This topic was selected because it served two purposes- getting information on barriers that Bangladeshi learners face in improving L2 English writing and getting writing samples of descriptive composition. We developed a semi-structured interview schedule of fifteen questions and used it to collect data from the teacher participants.

3.3. Data analysis procedures

For data analysis, we followed a deductive coding approach. We developed a writing assessment rubric based on large-scale standardized tests of English language proficiency to assess the writing samples from the participants of this study. The following criteria had been adapted from IELTS and TOEFL iBT writing assessment criteria except for the first one.

Table 2

Writing assessment rubric.

Criteria	Description
Topic sentence and thesis statement	Presence/absence in the writing
Elaboration of ideas	Ability to express ideas and intended content
Coherence and cohesion	Clarity, connection of ideas, cohesive devices/connectors
Lexical resource	Vocabulary range, accuracy, appropriacy, spelling errors, vocabulary choice errors

Grammatical range and accuracy	Grammatical errors and strengths, use of right form of verb, tenses, subject/verb agreement, articles, punctuation errors/ mechanics
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4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Research Question 1: Difficulties encountered by Bangladeshi undergraduates of English studies while improving academic writing skill

The first research question investigated the issues which Bangladeshi undergraduates of English studies encounter while developing academic writing skill. Findings are presented in the following based on the criteria of the assessment rubric.

4.1.1. Topic sentence and thesis statement

Writing samples written by the student participants revealed that only one student could start paragraphs with topic sentences but there was no thesis statement in their composition. The rest of the writing samples demonstrated neither topic sentences nor thesis statements. Moreover, the writing style and organization of ideas were not chronological. One student expressed that they did not practice academic English writing well by themselves. One possible reason might be that students are yet to develop pre-thinking/brainstorming skills. In the writing samples, there was a lack of good conclusions also.

Teachers' interview data revealed that they made much efforts on learning and using topic sentences and thesis statements in the classroom. One teacher described her teaching techniques of topic sentences and thesis statements. She used to provide students with a topic of composition and asked students how they could start writing on it. Each of the students produced several topic sentences and the teacher wrote all the sentences on board and asked them to choose the best one. After that, the teacher taught them elements/characteristics of a good topic sentence that covered the title and whole description in one simple sentence. One of the participating teachers said: "I tell them to think of a perfect topic sentence first." This teacher additionally asserted:

Besides this, I give them ideas about the thesis statement that a thesis statement should be an umbrella of the composition that covers all the supporting ideas of the writing.

4.1.2. Elaboration of ideas

Some ideas written in the composition samples were unclear and ambiguous. It was found in one of the writing samples that the student first thought in Bangla and then translated into English while writing the composition. One student disclosed that his main focus was on grammar which negatively impacted his writing skill development. Another student added that he lacked creativity and the general perception was that students who read more books were more creative. He also added that he could not include sufficient ideas and for this reason he wrote the same ideas repeatedly. The third participant wrote

that he did not have much knowledge about contemporary issues. Due to these reasons, ideas found in the student writing samples were not well-elaborated.

On the other hand, teachers' interviews revealed that they asked students to make an outline on any given topic before starting writing on it. Besides, teachers also helped students make an outline on any given topic. They made students elaborate ideas by explaining important ideas in-depth using essential points that develop the topic. One of the teachers said: "I always advise students to make an outline or have a brainstorming before starting to write anything."

4.1.3. Coherence and cohesion

Students' writing samples displayed limited use of cohesive devices. After scrutinizing all of the writing samples, it was found that students had poor knowledge in coherence and cohesion. Teachers' interview data revealed that they considered coherence and cohesion as the ornaments of writing. One teacher said she taught students the importance of connecting between ideas and sentences in writing. She provided them with several examples from written documents so students could understand well. One of the teachers mentioned: "To teach coherence, I explain how sentences relate to one another. I also explain the use of grammatical and lexical means to achieve connected text."

4.1.4. Lexical resource

Students realized that they had limited vocabulary and did not find appropriate words they needed to communicate a particular idea. The writing samples displayed vocabulary mistakes and use of inappropriate words. Some students reported that they used to memorize vocabulary but were unable to remember appropriate words while writing a piece. The two major issues regarding vocabulary were spelling mistakes and wrong choice of vocabulary in writing. Another reason found in the writing samples was a lack of contextualization while teaching vocabulary. Most importantly, they confessed that they were unable to think in English, rather they translated from Bangla to English while writing.

Teachers' interview revealed that they adopted effective techniques to teach and increase students' lexical resources. One teacher shared that she taught vocabulary and collocations by explaining their uses with examples in writing and speaking. Another teacher mentioned that she provided students with passages and short stories to read and instructed them to find out unknown words. She then shared the meaning of unknown words with synonyms and antonyms with the students. She also practiced and instructed students to use those words in sentences in different contexts both in classroom activity and homework. Therefore, it was evident that contextualization was ensured while teaching vocabulary which was crucial regarding vocabulary teaching. One of the teachers expressed: "I encourage students to learn vocabulary from contextual stories and dictionaries."

4.1.5. Grammatical range and accuracy

Writing samples revealed that students had frequent mistakes with preposition, tense, article, conjunction, apostrophe, placement of verbs in sentences, parts of speech, contraction, number, person, and punctuation. Students narrated that they memorized grammatical structures that they were unable to remember while writing in English. One of the reasons was the influence of the mother tongue. Grammatical constructions of Bangla and English are different. Eventually, students jumbled Bangla and English language structures while writing in English. So grammatical incompetence was found in all the writing samples.

Teachers' interviews demonstrated that most of the students encountered problems in using appropriate grammatical constructions. One of the teachers responded that she used to teach subject-verb agreement and the use of tense in writing class. She thought appropriate use of tense and subject-verb agreement were essential to write appropriately. To practice grammar, she used to write both correct and incorrect sentences on the board and asked students to find out the correct ones. Additionally, she clarified every sentence being grammatically correct or incorrect. One teacher remarked that: "In writing class, I explain many grammatical terms through providing examples and ask them to solve exercises."

4.1.6. Additional insights

While analyzing data, it was identified that one student participant completely copied and pasted materials from a website to prepare this composition task. This was an act of plagiarism which is an important finding in this research. Plagiarism is an academic offense that students are supposed to be familiar with. When they write assignments, projects, theses, dissertations, reports, and other academic pieces, proper citations and acknowledgement are required. So, knowledge on plagiarism is important for students' academic and moral development.

4.2. Research Question 2: Ways to facilitate teaching and learning of English writing skill for undergraduates of English studies

The second research question examined techniques and strategies that could be applied to facilitate teaching and learning of academic writing skill for undergraduates of English studies. The plausible ways to accelerate teaching and learning of English writing skills have been presented in the discussion section.

5. Discussion

Good English writing skill is rewarding because good communicative competence in English empowers EFL learners economically. It has been found that students with good writing skills get the opportunity to work as freelance writers. Although some of the academics denounce the use of Wikipedia in students' writing, Tardy (2010) believes that while getting oriented with this global forum, students are provided with the opportunity

to develop a perception regarding the trustworthiness of information in addition to mastering academic writing skills like creating content and editing. To publish an article in Wikipedia, a well-defined procedure is to be followed and this endeavor transforms a student writer into a polished writer. It is also important for the student writers to learn the techniques to avoid plagiarism for developing academic literacy skills and L2 writing. Consequently, L2 English learners receive worldwide readership and it will certainly enhance learner motivation and learner autonomy. To describe the importance of revision, Tardy (2010) presented her student's response as:

During these revising sessions, my skills of audience awareness, analysis, support, writing processes and conventional forms were reviewed again and again, and my paper was also polished again and again to meet the needs of the website. That's why I think the Wikipedia entry is the project that can truly provoke one's potential in writing. (p. 18)

Teachers might recommend students reading interesting stories, love stories, success stories, and travel stories written by native English speakers. It will be a source of entertainment for L2 English learners and they can gain English language proficiency simultaneously. Moreover, authentic materials and real-life topics might be recommended for free hand-writing and questions in the examination are to be set from creative areas which are usually unknown to the students. Teachers might encourage students to read English newspapers and storybooks written by native speakers. They might teach the appropriate use of vocabulary and sentence structure through these materials. Sometimes, short films with subtitles can be presented to teach English. Research demonstrated that contextualized reading (Tomitch, 2000 as quoted in Correia, 2006) makes a connection between texts and broader social context. Reading materials on culture available in the English newspapers and magazines which are locally interesting topics (Huckin, 1997 as quoted in Correia, 2006) are more beneficial for L2 learners. Moreover, introducing descriptive, narrative, and procedure genres in EFL writing would certainly benefit students in Bangladeshi teaching contexts. Similar to Setyowati and Widiati (2014), health education can be introduced to EFL writing which would improve students' academic writing skill in English. It will also grow an awareness of healthcare among them which is crucial to sustainable development of our country.

Teachers might use educational technology (e.g., Google drive) in the English writing class for collaborative writing. They might share academic and educational course materials on Facebook and Google drive. They can suggest students write their ideas and make comments there. They might introduce process-oriented syllabus and corrective feedback from teachers is also important in this regard.

Learning word families instead of a single word has been found very effective for language proficiency development. Students might learn free morphemes, bound morphemes, inflectional morphemes, derivational morphemes, class maintaining morphemes, and class changing morphemes to increase their vocabulary range.

Moreover, phrase-based language learning is effective in L2 English teaching and learning. To learn phrases, students might be given a piece of English article and asked to locate phrases and collocations with teacher's help. Then the teacher can ask students to make two or three sentences and sometimes more with each of the phrases and collocations. Mansour (2020) asserted that the learning of phrasal verbs needed to be emphasized and should be included in EFL teaching curriculum and course design with proper contextualization. Mansour (2020) also recommended that the practice of phrasal verbs was to be increased and included in classroom activities by the EFL teachers.

As per teachers' responses, grammatical and spelling mistakes were the frequent ones that majority of the students made in writing. It was found that students used to memorize grammatical rules but they could not produce grammatically accurate sentences in freehand English writing. So, grammar is to be taught following an inductive approach unlike deductive approach. Guban (2014) focused on the form and structure of writing different paragraphs (e.g., descriptive, comparative and contrastive, causes and effects) rather than the content and grammar of writing. Guban's study reported that paragraphs were more important over sentence-based learning in developing EFL learners' writing skill. Students should not remain possessed with grammatical structures only; Rinvolutri (2005) referred to this situation as "perfectionist dis-ease". Rinvolutri presented an excellent example of Earl Stevick who was extremely anxious about communicating in France and Germany due to his tension of making mistakes although he majored in French and German:

...I never seem to be totally satisfied with my writing. Every time I read what I have written I feel like revising something. Sometimes it is just a comma and sometimes a whole paragraph. I guess I would like to do the same with these lines. I love writing but it's so "painful" reading your own texts over and over again. (p. 42)

Transformation of sentences is a good technique to develop L2 English learners' grammatical competence. The teacher can present a simple sentence and ask students to transform it into complex and compound sentences. They can give a sentence in present simple tense and ask students to transform it into other types of tenses including active to passive and passive to active forms. Moreover, translation from native to target language might improve learners' grammatical knowledge. Karim et al. (2017) suggested teachers focus on grammatical issues in order to stop learners' repetitive errors. In a similar vein, Mohammad and Hazarika (2016) presented some recommendations such as raising learner awareness, using both inductive and deductive approaches to teaching grammar, writing topics of learners' area of interests, using audio-visual materials and games, and using activities that integrate listening and writing.

Learner motivation needs to be enhanced for effective English language teaching and learning. To teach learners, teachers might bring worldwide contexts in EFL writing classes to strengthen their learning. Teachers might present to them the language and

grammar written in *Voice of America*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* etc. One teacher participant expressed that he had tried to inform learners about the importance of learning English for their future and everyday life. He engaged them in writing by providing interesting topics. He taught them necessary vocabulary from different news portals and websites. Moreover, teachers might inspire students to write in English about their observation, realization, recommendation, and newly acquired knowledge on social media.

Teacher training is required for teacher empowerment, their professional development, and better performance in the classroom. One of the teachers opined that online teacher training improved her teaching performance. She completed Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) titled *Using Educational Technology in the Classroom*, *Integrating Critical Thinking into the Exploration of Culture in EFL Classroom*, and *TESOL Methodology* via Canvas Network. She added that while completing the courses, she learned to use educational technology in English classes and some effective techniques of teaching four language skills to ESL learners. There are a good number of professional development programs such as E-Teacher training, Online Professional English Network Program which are sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. Moreover, many MOOCs and Global Online Courses are administered by top professors of top-ranking universities of the world which are free of cost. Thus, our English teachers might accept these opportunities for their professional upgradation.

Overall, this study recommends the use of educational technology, genre-based L2 English writing, critical reading, higher-order thinking skills, process-oriented syllabus, authentic topics and realia, inductive approach to teaching grammar, phrases and collocations, word families, and constructive feedback in teaching academic English writing at tertiary level in Bangladesh.

6. Limitations and future directions

Based on the limitations of this study, some directions for future research are proposed. First, sample size might be increased in future research which would produce more detailed insights regarding the difficulties that L2 English learners experience in developing academic writing skill. Second, more writing samples from student participants should be included in further study to obtain a detailed account of errors in L2 English writing. Last but not least, to answer the second research question, data could have been collected from experts of second/foreign language pedagogy.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the difficulties that Bangladeshi undergraduates of English studies encounter while developing their academic English writing skill and the possible solutions. The major impediments include L2 English learners' inability to use topic sentences and thesis statements, elaborate ideas in a piece of academic writing, maintain coherence and cohesion, use appropriate lexical resources and grammatical

constructions. The possible solutions include genre-based English writing, contextualized and critical reading, using authentic materials, learning word families and phrases, teaching grammar inductively, teaching transformation of sentences and using educational technology in English writing class.

To improve writing skill in English, students should take charge of their own learning. They can write to share their surrounding topics and issues such as neighborhood, food habits, lifestyle, costumes, celebrations, educational institutions, economy, culture, environment, peace, safety, international relations, global issues, and national affairs with the rest of the world. In this era of technological advancement, students can compose a write-up in English and post it on Facebook, Wikipedia and Freelancing journalism websites to share knowledge. They can promote peace education by communicating and befriending people from other nationalities and it will develop their cultural intelligence and mutual understanding among nations which are crucial to lifelong learning and sustainable development. Therefore, it is expected that the recommendations of this study will benefit English studies programs in Bangladesh and in similar L2 English contexts.

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