

Exploring Nuanced Errors in Bangladeshi Tertiary EFL Students' Writing Mechanics: A Pedagogical Implication

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Abstract:

Background: In order to enhance tertiary EFL students' formal writing skills, it is crucial that they develop proficiency in writing mechanics alongside their syntactic maturity. It is crucial because weaknesses in writing mechanics can significantly impact the overall quality of the content.

Purpose: the present study aims to examine the nuances of the sub-categories of three major writing mechanics and thus bring up some implications for EFL teachers, syllabus designers, and material designers.

Methodology: This study is qualitative in nature and collected 42 narrative essays from 42 tertiary students. The participants comprised both English and non-English majors from seven private and public universities in Bangladesh. The collected data were analyzed using Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) summative content analysis.

Findings: The findings of the analysis indicate that the most error-prone mechanics for students are the correct usage of ending punctuation marks (specifically the full stop) and non-ending punctuation marks (such as commas), while the second most challenging mechanics are the correct spellings of di- and polysyllabic words. Further, in capitalization mechanics, they encounter difficulties in the appropriate use of uppercase letters.

Research implications: The study concludes with pedagogical implications that tertiary EFL teachers, syllabus designers, and material designers should put more emphasis on the sub-categories of writing mechanics while designing writing tasks for tertiary EFL learners.

Keywords: *EFL; Writing; Writing Mechanics; Error Analysis; Bangladesh.*

1 Introduction

Writing is considered one of the most crucial skills required by modern individuals involved in global communication. Despite the evolution and variation of writing genres, the importance of writing itself has not diminished in either synchronous or asynchronous modes of communication (Warschauer, 2007). However, acquiring writing as a skill, process, and product has always been reported to be a daunting task (Husna, 2017; Klimova, 2014), especially in the case of second or foreign language writing acquisition (Negari, 2011). This is particularly true for English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) students. Therefore, the learning and teaching of writing in EFL/ESL have been the subject of extensive research (e.g., Raimes, 1983; Calkins, 1986; Juzwik et al., 2006; Warschauer, 2007; Randolph, 2009; Teng et al., 2022; Kitamura, 2023) due to the numerous difficulties associated with writing acquisition. ESL teaching and writing acquisition are relational and interplay in ESL classrooms (Ansari, 2020) involving issues of errors. In order to develop effective writing pedagogies, it is crucial to identify errors in different aspects of EFL learners' writing and that is why research attention has also been directed towards error analysis in EFL/ESL students' writing (Myles, 2002; Khansir, 2013; Wu & Garza, 2014; Abied et al., 2022).

It is noticeable that in the domain of EFL/ESL writing, L2 writing researchers have focused their attention on errors and feedback related to higher-order concerns such as organization and content, while lower-order concerns like mechanics and grammar have been relatively neglected (Thi & Nikolov, 2022). However, the analysis of errors in writing mechanics is crucial because, as Rafoth and Rubin (1984) have pointed out, mechanics have a greater impact on raters' judgments than content. Furthermore, studies have shown that EFL students tend to make more errors in mechanics than in grammar (Toba & Noor, 2019). While some studies have been conducted on the errors in mechanics in EFL writing in non-native English-speaking contexts, such as Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, these studies have primarily focused on major categories of mechanics, such as punctuation, spelling, and capitalization, and have yielded contrasting findings (Sandrawati & Jurianto, 2021; Almukhaizeem, 2013; Yuliahm, 2021; Toba & Noor, 2019; Yuliahm et al., 2019).

However, the previous studies have not considered that the difficulty levels of different subcategories of mechanics, such as spelling in mono-, di-, tri-, and polysyllabic words, ending and non-ending punctuation marks, and capitalization of proper and non-proper nouns, may not be the same (Cahen et al., 1971; Inhayer, 2009; Shweba & Mujiyanto, 2017). Therefore, further studies are needed to provide a more nuanced understanding of the errors in writing mechanics. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the differences in difficulty levels across

subcategories of mechanics, such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, among tertiary level EFL students in Bangladesh. By providing a more comprehensive understanding of the errors made in writing mechanics by EFL students, this study is expected to help educators tailor their teaching approaches and resources to better meet the diverse needs of their students.

1.1 Objectives and Research Questions

The aim of the present study is to understand the nuanced errors across the sub-categories of the mechanics in the writing of the tertiary level EFL students. To achieve these objectives, the study is directed by the following three specific research questions:

- What are the differences in difficulty levels across the sub-categories of the mechanics of spelling in the writing of tertiary EFL students?
- What are the differences in difficulty levels across the sub-categories of the mechanics of punctuation in the writing of tertiary EFL students?
- What are the differences in difficulty levels across the sub-categories of the mechanics of capitalization in the writing of tertiary EFL students?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Error Analysis

The present study adopts an error analysis (EA) approach to understand the errors made by second language learners in their acquisition of a new language (Corder, 1967; Brown, 2000). EA is considered crucial as it helps identify the developmental state of the learners' language proficiency. EA is an area of interest to the students, teachers, and researchers involved in tertiary EFL education. EA is beneficial for the EFL learners involved in L2 acquisition as they can use errors as a tool to improve their language proficiency. EA is also helpful for the EFL teachers as they can better understand their students' level of learning, which keeps a trajectory (Alam et al., 2022). Meanwhile, researchers can use EA to gain insights into how language is learned and structured (Corder, 1981).

Psycholinguists have identified two major types of errors in the field of SLA, namely, interlingual errors (transfer errors) and developmental errors (Richards, 1974; Bhela, 1999). Interlingual errors occur when the rules of the first language interfere with the rules of the second language. For instance, the lack of capitalization in the Bengali writing system may cause Bengali students to make errors in capitalization when writing in English (Bhela, 1999). On the other hand, developmental errors occur due to the overgeneralization of some rules of the second language. An example of this is the use of "sings" instead of "sing" by learners due to the overgeneralization of the third person "s" rule (Richards, 1974).

These two types of errors are considered fundamental in SLA and are useful in accounting for EFL writing acquisition. By analyzing the errors made by students, who are, according to Alam and Adelina (2023), diverse in performance, teachers and researchers can understand the difficulties faced by learners and tailor their teaching approaches to facilitate language acquisition (Corder, 1967; Brown, 2000).

2.2 Writing Mechanics: Types and Difficulty

The acquisition of writing mechanics is an essential aspect of EFL education, especially for tertiary level students who have achieved a higher level of syntactic maturity (Stewart & Grobe, 1979). As mature adults, these students are expected to possess a good command of writing mechanics to effectively convey their ideas in writing. However, error-prone writing often neglects the importance of formal mechanics, which are crucial in academic writing genres (Taylor & Nightingale, 1990). From functional linguistics perspectives, meaning that language essentially makes may be problematic for erroneous forms of language (Alam et al., 2021). Furthermore, errors in mechanics have a significant impact on the scores assigned by human raters who evaluate written essays, as they play a crucial role in the overall evaluation of a student's written work (Taylor & Nightingale, 1990). Thus, research has been directed towards examining errors in writing mechanics, as students often have different strengths and weaknesses across various subcategories of mechanics. The following subcategories have been found to be particularly challenging:

• Spelling

Spelling is a fundamental aspect of writing, and the English spelling system differs significantly from those of other languages due to its unplanned, phonographically inconsistent aspect and also its historically, geographically fluid nature (Upward & Davidson, 2011). Previous research on English spelling mainly focused on three aspects: (a) the speller, (b) instructional methods, and (c) the word to be spelled (Cahen et al., 1971). The present study focuses on the third dimension, that is, the words spelled by tertiary EFL writers in their writing, by taking into account the spelling errors in the written forms of English. The study assumes that the level of difficulty in spelling English words varies according to their syllabification. Invernizzi et al. (1994) found that students often leave out vowels when spelling polysyllabic words, which they refer to as "invented spelling." Additionally, spelling short words poses more of a challenge for children with dyslexia (CD) than long words, which is influenced by phonology since they have not yet acquired the correct English phonology (Palladino et al., 2016). Dysgraphic patients show serial order effects on

the spelling of longer words compared to shorter words (Palladino et al., 2016), while both normal adult individuals and those having Alzheimer's disease perform more poorly on the spelling of longer words than shorter words (Neils et al., 1995). The present study treats the lengths of words as subcategories of spelling mechanics.

• Capitalization

According to Anwar Siddiqui (2015), capitalization is a fundamental aspect of standard English language writing that distinguishes between uppercase and lowercase letters. This is unique to English writing and is not present in many other languages, such as Bangla. As such, it is essential to investigate the errors in capitalization made by EFL students as they are required to produce clear, effective, and standard academic texts. However, it is also important to recognize that students may have varying levels of difficulty with different subcategories of capitalization. For instance, Saudi tertiary EFL students who are not familiar with the uppercase and lowercase letter systems may overgeneralize uppercase letters, using them incorrectly instead of lowercase letters (Anwar Siddiqui, 2015; Hayik, 2020). In contrast, students who copy texts often struggle with using lowercase letters correctly, as they mistakenly turn uppercase letters into lowercase letters (Porte, 1995). In addition, research shows that EFL students in Taiwan who communicate through emails may commit errors in the use of both uppercase and lowercase, confusing the two (Huang, 2016). Likewise, EFL students in computer-mediated communication also make errors in using uppercase and lowercase letters in a non-normative way (Averianova, 2007). Further, a study conducted on tertiary-level EFL students in Libya suggests that maintaining the proper use of uppercase letters is a challenge for non-major English students (Hamed, 2018). The present study considers the uppercase and lowercase letter systems as subcategories of the mechanics of capitalization.

• Punctuation Marks

According to Thomas (2021), punctuation marks can be categorized into three sub-categories: ending punctuation, non-ending punctuation or internal punctuation, and enclosing punctuation. Thomas (2021) further provides a more detailed explanation, stating that ending punctuation marks include the period (.), question mark (?), and exclamation mark (!), while non-ending punctuation marks consist of the comma (,), semi-colon (;), colon (:), and dash (-). Ending symbols occur at the end of a sentence to mean the closing of the sentence, while non-ending symbols occur within sentences and indicate relationships between words. Enclosing punctuation marks include quotation marks (" ") and brackets [] which enclose part of a sentence or a whole sentence. Thomas (2021) explains the three categories in detail. Ending punctuation marks are those three that indicate the ending of an English sentence, which are the period or full stop (.), interrogation mark (?), and mark of exclamation (!). There are four non-ending punctuation/internal punctuation marks in English: the comma (,), the semi-colon (;), the colon (:), and the dash (-) (Inhayer, 2009). According to Thomas (2021), these punctuation symbols occur within the sentences and indicate certain relationships between the words of the sentences. Enclosing punctuation includes quotation marks (" ") and brackets [] that enclose some part or parts of a sentence (Thomas, 2021). Although errors in punctuation marks are often reported to be the most error-prone writing mechanics for tertiary EFL writers (e.g., Al-Mwzaiji & Alzubi, 2022), the present study assumes that the difficulty level for each sub-category may not be the same. Inhayer (2009)'s analysis found that Iraqi students of English struggle the most with non-ending punctuation, as evidenced by the errors they make in comprehension and composition exams. Specifically, the dash posed the greatest challenge at 72%, followed by the comma at 63%, the semi-colon at 55%, and the colon at 50%. However, this study only focused on non-ending punctuation and did not consider the other two sub-categories.

• Tertiary EFL Learners' Errors in Writing Mechanics: Punctuations, Spelling, and Capitalizations

The literature available on the writing mechanics of tertiary EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students is limited, but the existing research suggests that students encounter difficulties in this area. For example, Sandrawati and Jurianto's (2021) study on Indonesian university students' typewritten essays revealed errors in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, with the comma being the most error-prone punctuation mark. Additionally, Almkhaizeem's (2013) investigation into the writing mechanics competency of first-year English Department students at Saudi Arabian universities showed numerous spelling and selective punctuation errors. More specifically, the study found that spelling errors, such as adding "s" to verbs or nouns, adding "ing" to verb stems, and adding "ed" to verb stems, were more common than punctuation errors, which focused on possession, commas, and full stops.

In a recent investigation conducted by Yuliawati (2021), the writing mechanics of English Education students at Jakarta State University were analyzed. The sample consisted of 65 writing assignments, and the study focused on the accuracy of punctuation, capitalization, spelling, italicization, and numbering. Interestingly, the courses in question were non-writing courses, which suggests that writing assignments were not the primary focus of the classes. The findings of the study indicate that the students' accuracy levels varied across different areas of writing mechanics, with punctuation accuracy at a relatively low 41%, while capitalization and spelling accuracy were higher at 82% and 83%, respectively. The accuracy of italicization and numbering was even higher, at 96% and 98%, respectively. Overall, the researcher concluded that the level of accuracy in writing mechanics was sufficient, as the identified mistakes did not significantly impact the reader's understanding.

In another study conducted by Yuliahm et al. (2019), 15 essays written by second-year English Department students across three levels of writing ability (high, average, and low) were analyzed to identify the errors in writing mechanics. The study, which focused on a writing course in the third semester, found a total of 204 errors, with errors in punctuation being the most frequent, accounting for 21.6% of all errors. Errors in conjunction use and subject-verb agreement came in second and third place, accounting for 20.6% and 20.1% of all errors, respectively. Spelling errors were the fourth most common error type, with a frequency of 15.2%, followed by capitalization errors at 14.7% and sentence fragment errors at 7.8%.

Additionally, Toba and Noor (2019) conducted a study on the writing skills of 52 fifth-semester English students at IAIN Samarinda during the 2018-2019 academic year in Indonesia. The study aimed to explore their abilities in writing compare-and-contrast essays. The results showed that mechanics was the biggest problem the students faced, accounting for 33.40% of all errors, followed by grammar at 25.60%, which was almost equivalent to content at 24.30%, and organization at 20.60%. The errors in mechanics were found to include punctuation, spelling, and capitalization.

3 Methods

3.1 Research Design

The objective of this study was to examine the challenges faced by tertiary EFL students, both English and non-English majors, in terms of writing mechanics. Writing mechanics refer to the technical aspects of writing, such as punctuation, grammar, and spelling, which are present in written outputs such as academic essays, paragraphs, books, emails, and more (Taylor & Nightingale, 1990). As written products are qualitative data, the researchers opted for a qualitative research design to answer the research questions. The aim was to determine the students' difficulties in various major categories and sub-categories of mechanics as reflected in their writing. To achieve this, the researchers counted the errors made by the students using error tables and the Excel 2010 program and compared them across different sub-categories. This was done through summative content analysis (SCA), which involves analyzing written texts (Schaaf et al., 2022) and counting the targeted contents, i.e., errors, and comparing them (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

3.2 Participants

The research involved 42 tertiary EFL students, consisting of 12 males and 30 females, who were enrolled in Bachelor's programs related to linguistics, English, Mechatronics, and CSE majors at seven universities located in Bangladesh. These universities were distributed across three different divisions in the country, with three being public and four being private. All the students had a compulsory 13-year EFL learning experience through the national curriculum in Bangla medium during their primary, secondary and higher secondary levels. At the time of the study, the students were either in their first or second academic year. Their writing proficiency demonstrated a blend of abilities, with some students displaying high, medium, and low proficiency levels.

3.3 Data and Data Collection

This study utilized 42 handwritten narrative essays as qualitative content data. These essays were collected as part of the principal author's PhD project on writing problems among tertiary EFL students in the Bangladeshi context where writing is taught focusing on segregated items (Ullah et al., 2022) but still errors are common to notice in those items. The essays were written by 42 EFL tertiary students between June 2022 and December 2022 and all wrote on the same topic: "A Memorable Day of Your University Life." To collect the data, the principal researcher contacted the EFL faculties of seven universities and obtained permission from both the faculty members and students to proceed. The principal researcher visited the universities and at the appointed times and with the help of the respective faculties arranged a test. During the test, the students were given one hour to handwrite their essays. The faculties invigilated the writing sessions and provided assistance with clarifications on instructions and related matters. After completion, the students handed over their handwritten essays to the faculty members and the faculty members then handed over the test papers to the principal researcher. Overall, the data collected was a subset of the larger categories of data collected for the PhD project of the principal researcher of the present study.

3.4 Data Analysis:

The researchers employed the summative content analysis (SCA) of Hsieh and Shannon (2005) to guide the analysis of the collected data. Initially, the errors in the essays were identified through an initial coding process, which involved three rounds of close reading by the researchers. The manually coded errors were then quantified and categorized into sub-categories based on the major mechanics of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. The resulting data tables contained the coded errors, presented as numbers and percentages. To compare the difficulty levels among the students, the researchers recalculated the tabulated errors in the mechanics sub-categories, presenting the varying difficulties as percentages and numerical values in different types of charts using the Microsoft Excel program. This representation of the varying difficulties in the sub-categories of writing mechanics used by the EFL students confirmed the answers to the research questions.

4 Findings

Research question (a): What are the differences in difficulty levels across the sub-categories of the mechanics of spelling?

In the summative content analysis, it is found that the EFL students make the second highest mistakes in the spelling mechanics (35%) (see Fig. 1):

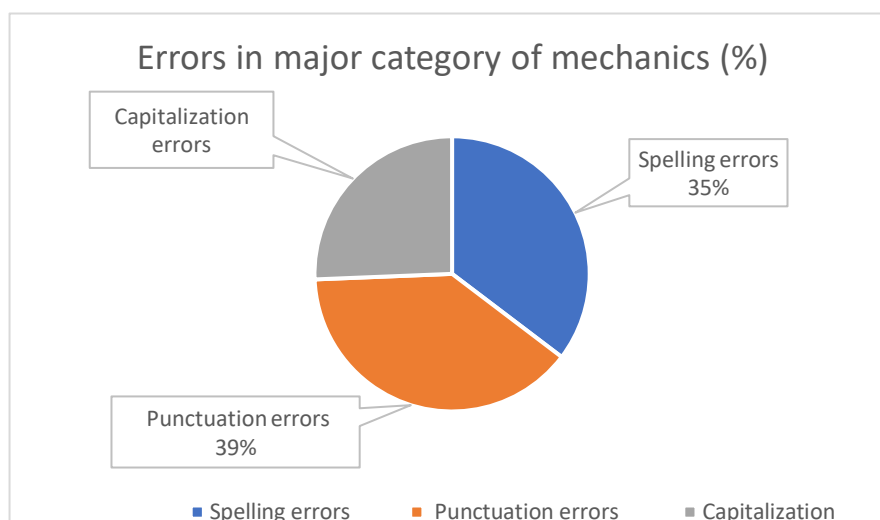


Fig. 1: errors in three major categories of writing mechanics e.g., spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, with percentage

Fig. 1 shows the errors in three major categories of writing mechanics e.g., spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, with percentage. Two representational examples of spelling errors are:

- “The day started with full of excitement.” (Student-1b)
- “Then we went to a restaurent.” (Student-5d)

However, they make 60 % spelling mistakes in mono-syllabic words, 82% in di-syllabic words, and 95% in polysyllabic words:

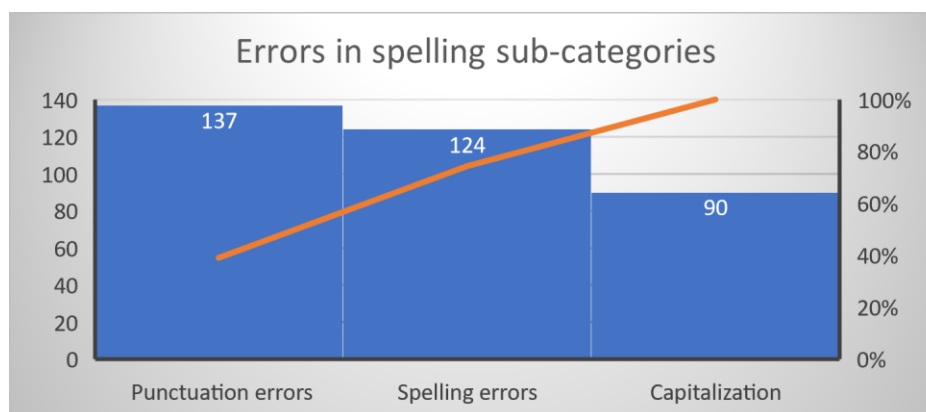


Fig. 2: EFL students’ varying difficulty levels in three sub-categories of spelling (mono-syllabic words, di-syllabic words, and poly-syllabic words)

Fig. 2 shows EFL students’ varying difficulty levels in three sub-categories of spelling (mono-syllabic words, di-syllabic words, and poly-syllabic words).

Some representational examples of spelling mistakes in mono-syllabic words, di-syllabic words, and polysyllabic words are:

- “Boyes and Girls took their sits in the same bance.” (Student-3d)
- “When I entired the university, I was so happy.” (Student-4d)
- “In the reception, all the facalty members were present.” (Student-Z)

Research question (b): What are the differences in difficulty levels across the sub-categories of the mechanics of punctuation in the writing of tertiary EFL students?

Summative analysis asserts in the first place that the most error-prone writing mechanics for the EFL students in question is punctuation (39%) (see Fig. 1). However, they commit highest errors in non-ending punctuation (68) while second highest in ending punctuation (66) and lowest in enclosing punctuation (6) (see Fig. 3 below):

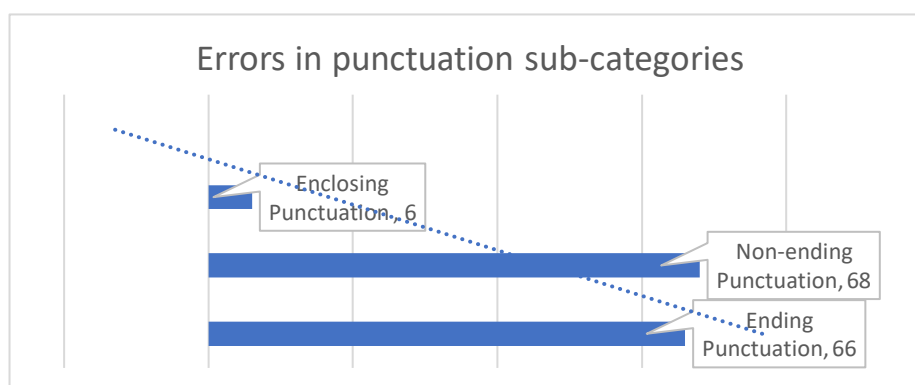


Fig. 3: tertiary EFL students' varying difficulty levels in three sub-categories of punctuations i.e., ending, non-ending and enclosing punctuations

Fig. 3 shows tertiary EFL students' varying difficulty levels in three sub-categories of punctuations i.e., ending, non-ending and enclosing punctuations. Some representational examples of the errors in non-ending punctuation, ending punctuation, and enclosing punctuation are:

- "In this populated city, it is very hard task to find beautiful greeny garden. But in my versity have a beautiful greeny garden." (Student-6b)
- "Students who attends those classes, was excited." (Student-7a)
- "The main hall room which is called "Dr. Wazed Miah Seminar Hall" it is a very well decorated and nice place." (Student-4b)

Furthermore, of all the above three sub-categories, students make highest punctuation errors with ending punctuation of full stop (66), followed by non-ending punctuation of comma (53), non-ending punctuation of apostrophe (14), enclosing punctuation of quotation (6) and non-ending punctuation of dash (1) (see Chart 4 below):

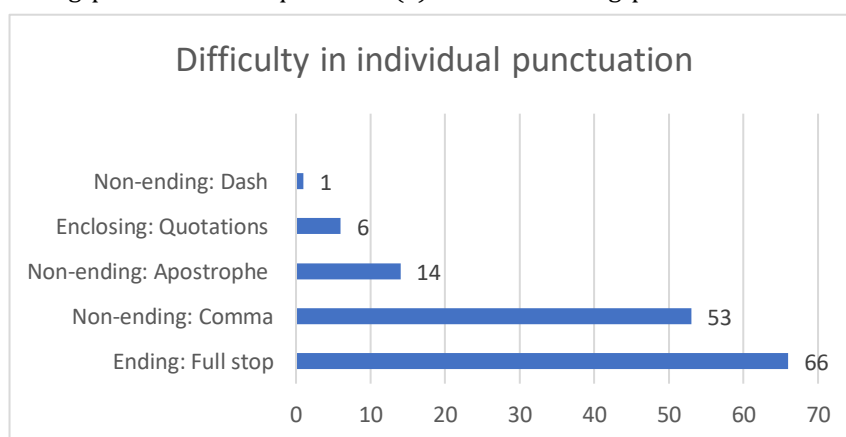


Fig. 4: EFL students' varying difficulty levels in the individual punctuation uses

Fig. 4 shows EFL students' varying difficulty levels in the individual punctuation uses.

Some representational examples of the errors in ending punctuation of full stop, non-ending punctuation of comma, non-ending punctuation of apostrophe, enclosing punctuation of quotation, and non-ending punctuation of dash are:

- "I had gotten a flower bouquet form our honourable VC Sir. And we all students were eaten a very tasty sweet." (Student-4b)
- "As I am a student, of an university I have some great memories of my university life." (Student-2c)
- "Generally, in every morning, we attended in the class, sometimes there held a many programs by some organizations" (Student-3c)
- "In this university there's so much memories." (Student-3c)
- "The name of my university is "Bangladesh Army University of science and Technology". (Student-3a)
- "There held a fascinating a programme—that I never forget." (Student-3a)

Research question (c): What are the differences in difficulty levels across the sub-categories of the mechanics of capitalization in the writing of tertiary EFL students?

Finally, the summative content analysis reveals that the EFL students in question commit the lowest errors or the third highest errors (26%) in the writing mechanics of capitalization (see Fig. 1 above). However, they commit more errors in uppercases (55%) than in lowercases (45%) (see Fig. 5):

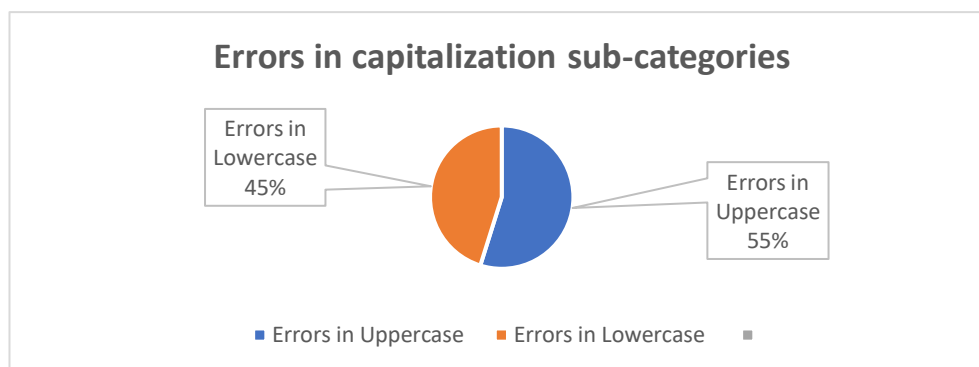


Fig. 5: EFL students' varying difficulty levels in two sub-categories of capitalization i.e., uppercase and lowercase

Fig. 5 shows EFL students' varying difficulty levels in two sub-categories of capitalization i.e., uppercase and lowercase. Some representational errors in uppercases and lowercases are:

- "after that day I went to take first university class." (Student-3b)
- "They are really friendly then a teacher come to our class room." (Student-6c)

5 Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the difficulty levels of sub-categories of spelling mechanics in the English language orthography that first- and second-year tertiary level EFL students (both English and non-English majors) of different public and private universities in Bangladesh face when writing narrative essays. The study found that spelling errors were the second highest error pattern in their narrative writing, which is in contrast to previous studies that found spelling errors to be the highest (Almukhaizeem, 2013) or the third (Yuliawati, 2021) or fourth (Yuliahm et al., 2019) highest error pattern in other contexts. It indicates that compared to other global tertiary EFL contexts, spelling is the most error-prone writing mechanics among both English and non-English major tertiary EFL students in Bangladesh.

The current study found that EFL students have varying difficulty levels across different syllabifications of English words. Specifically, the students make the highest number of mistakes in di- and poly-syllabic words, indicating that they have poor acquisition of spelling mechanics in these sub-categories. Interestingly, the students have a stronger acquisition of monosyllabic spelling in English. These findings contradict the findings of previous research on children with dyslexia who struggle more with short words than with long words (Palladino et al., 2016). Instead, the present study found that normal, adult tertiary EFL students in Bangladesh struggle more with long words than with short words, which is consistent with earlier research (Neils et al., 1995).

The present study also aimed to investigate students' difficulty levels in the sub-categories of punctuation mechanics while writing narrative essays. In the first place, the findings of the study agree with the previous studies of Yuliawati (2021), Yuliahm et al. (2019) and Al-Mwzaiji and Alzubi (2022) that identify most frequent errors committed by the EFL students in punctuation mechanics. However, it contradicts with Almukhaizeem (2013)'s study that finds punctuation as the second most error-prone mechanics for the tertiary EFL writers. The present study adds more to the literature by further reporting that overall, the tertiary EFL students in question find non-ending punctuation marks most difficult which matches Inhayer (2009)'s study. The students also find the use of ending punctuation to be difficult, almost to the same degree. However, they are pretty good users of enclosing punctuation. The students commit the highest number of errors in the ending punctuation of full stop / periods while they commit the second highest errors in non-ending punctuation of comma. Compared to the other punctuation, errors in non-ending punctuation of the apostrophe are relatively low. The lowest error-prone individual punctuation mark is the non-ending punctuation of the dash followed by the enclosing punctuation of quotation marks. This finding contradicts Inhayer (2009)'s study as it finds dash to be the most challenging non-ending punctuation.

The present study further aimed to investigate the difficulty levels of sub-categories of capitalization mechanics in the English language orthography that the first- and second-year tertiary level EFL students (both English and non-English majors) of different public and private universities in Bangladesh face while writing narrative essays. In the first place, the study finds that compared to punctuation and spelling, the students made relatively fewer errors (26%) in capitalization. This is contrary to the findings in other global EFL contexts that placed capitalization as the second most error-prone mechanics (Sandrawati & Jurianto, 2021; Yuliawati, 2021). However, this finding is consistent with Yuliahm et al. (2019)'s study which identified capitalization as one of the two least error-prone mechanics in tertiary EFL learners' writing (Yuliahm et al., 2019). Previous studies reported that EFL students in different global contexts often confuse uppercases with lowercases (Anwar Siddiqui, 2015; Hayik, 2020; Porte, 1995; Huang, 2016; Averianova, 2007). However, the present study adds that the EFL students in question found it more difficult to use uppercases correctly than lowercases, which is consistent with the findings of Hamed (2018)'s study. This suggests that their acquisition of English lowercases is better than that of English uppercases.

6 Conclusion And Implication

The aim of the present study is to understand the nuanced errors across the sub-categories of the writing mechanics of the tertiary EFL students of Bangladesh. Based on the discussion presented in the above section, the study concludes that spelling errors were the second highest error pattern in narrative writing among tertiary EFL students in Bangladesh, indicating that spelling is the most error-prone writing mechanics among both English and non-English major tertiary EFL students in the country. The most difficult spelling areas for the students were the di- and poly-syllabic words but they had a stronger acquisition of mono-syllabic spelling. The study also found that the use of non-ending punctuation marks was the most difficult area of writing mechanics for the students. However, in terms of the errors made in individual punctuation marks, students committed the highest number of errors in the use of the ending punctuation mark of full stops/periods though the students were relatively good at using enclosing punctuation marks. The use of non-ending punctuation with the apostrophes had a relatively low error rate. The least error-prone punctuation mark was the non-ending dash, followed by the enclosing punctuation of quotation marks. Additionally, the students had better acquisition of capitalization than spelling and punctuation, but they found it more difficult to use uppercase than lowercase. Based on the described findings of the present study, teachers can inform their instructional practices and help students improve their writing mechanics skills, specifically spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Precisely, the present study recommends the following pedagogical decisions:

- As spelling poses a significant challenge for tertiary EFL students in Bangladesh, regardless of their English proficiency level or major, EFL teachers should prioritize spelling instruction.
- As students have more difficulty with di-syllabic and poly-syllabic words than mono-syllabic words, EFL teachers should provide targeted spelling exercises that focus on teaching the spelling aspects of di-syllabic and poly-syllabic types of words to help students improve their spelling.
- Since students appear to have a stronger acquisition of monosyllabic spelling, teachers can focus on strategies that help students break down longer words into smaller components to make them easier to spell.
- As the use of the non-ending dash had the lowest error rate, followed by the enclosing punctuation of quotation marks and as additionally, the use of the non-ending punctuation mark of apostrophes had a relatively low error rate, EFL teachers can spend less time teaching the rules of these punctuation marks.
- EFL teachers should prioritize teaching and providing targeted practice exercises on the ending and non-ending punctuation marks, especially full stops/periods and commas.
- EFL teachers should prioritize teaching and providing targeted practice exercises on the rules and conventions for using uppercase letters in different contexts, such as at the beginning of sentences, proper nouns, and titles.

6.1 Funding of the Study

The study received no internal or external funding.

6.2 Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest.

6.3 Data Availability

Data used for this study may be available on request to the principal author.

6.4 Acknowledgement

This article is a smaller chunk of the greater PhD work of the first author. He sincerely acknowledges the contribution of his supervisor.

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