# Influence of Mother Tongue on English Writing: An Error-analysis Study about Grade 9 Students in Pakistan

MUHAMMAD ABID MALIK
*School of Education,*
*Beaconhouse National University,*
*Lahore, Pakistan*
*m_abidmalik7@yahoo.com*

TAYYABA AZAM
*Islamabad Model School for Girls,*
*Islamabad, Pakistan*

HABIBULLAH PATHAN
*Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Pakistan*

SAHIB KHATOON
*Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Pakistan*

## ABSTRACT

*The influence of the mother tongue on second language acquisition is well-known. Pakistan is a multi-lingual country with scores of mother tongues, yet their influence on English language writing has not been investigated properly. This error-analysis study contributes in this regard by finding out syntactical and semantical errors committed by Pakistani students with different mother tongues. It also investigated if there were any patterned differences or similarities in error-making. Data was collected from one hundred grade 9 students from a public school in Islamabad. They belonged to five different mother tongue groups i.e. Punjabi, Pashto, Urdu, Hindko and Potohari. The findings showed that generally all five groups committed more syntactical errors than semantical ones. Overall, they were most vulnerable in tense, spelling and subject-verb-agreement. Four of those groups (Punjabi, Pashto, Urdu and Hindko) showed similar performance with a range of 4.18-5.34 in syntactical, 3.61-4.25 in semantical, and 8.41-9.25 in total errors. Potohari group committed twice as many errors as any other group. The study recommends that while developing the teaching materials and assignments, teachers should consider the special needs of different mother tongue groups. Furthermore, special attention should be paid to Potohari group by providing them with extra English classes and materials.*

*Keywords: mother tongue; second language acquisition; error-analysis; English writing; Pakistan*

## INTRODUCTION

Errors in writing are very common amongst non-native learners (Jolivet, 1997; Crompton, 2011; Chaudhary & Zahrani, 2020). They mostly occur due to ignorance, lack of knowledge, peers' influence, the language of social and electronic media, or the influence of the mother tongue (Kavaliauskiene, 2009; Crompton, 2011; Haider, 2012). Research shows that the influence of the mother tongue is one of the more important reasons behind it (Ferguson, 1965; Hyland & Anan, 2006; Hamza et al., 2017).

The influence of one's culture and mother tongue on second language acquisition has been understood for a long time. Hocket (1958) related the human language learning process with cultural transmission. This means that once humans have adopted a language system, it may

influence second language acquisition. This influence becomes a real challenge when the structures of the two languages are different. Many times, second language learners mix the structure of the two languages (Ferguson, 1965). Not only does the difference in structure influence and impedes the language acquisition process, but also the difference in the sound patterns (Wang et al., 2020).

This situation gets even more complex and complicated in the classes where students come from multi-lingual backgrounds (Mack, 2010). It is because the students with different mother tongues may make different kinds of mistakes and errors due to their differing influences. Schools in Pakistani big cities usually have the same kind of diversity. Consequently, it is important to find out if the Pakistani students with different mother tongues have any patterned differences in the error-making during English writing. It is also important to identify what kinds of errors students with different mother tongues are likely to make. In this way, teachers can focus more on those weaker areas, thus helping the students in improving their English writing skills.

The current study is conducted for the same purpose. It tries to identify those specific areas of weakness. The findings can help the teachers to further improve their students' English writing skills.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The current study has two main research objectives:
- to find out syntactical and semantical errors made by grade 9 Pakistani students with different mother tongues, and
- to find out if there are any patterned similarities or differences amongst those groups in error-making.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant in multiple ways. It may indicate how different Pakistani mother tongues influence English writing. It would also help in identifying the vulnerable areas in English writing for Pakistani students with different mother tongues. In this way, not only can the students with a particular mother tongue know their weaknesses better, but the teachers can also focus more on those specific areas; hence improving students' English writing skills.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### PAKISTAN: LANGUAGE DIVERSITY AND EDUCATION SYSTEM

Pakistan is the fifth-most populous country in the world with an estimated population of around 221 million (Worldometer, n.d.). It is a multi-lingual society with dozens of mother tongues and regional languages (Rahman, 2019). According to Ethnologue, there were 66 languages and mother tongues in Pakistan (excluding variations) in 2016 (Lewis et al., 2016). Pakistan Bureau of Statistics mentions six major mother tongues and languages in Pakistan i.e. Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi and Saraiki (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, n.d.).

Almost all of the mother tongues and languages in Pakistan are from the Indo-European language family, and most fall under the Indo-Aryan sub-group (Violatti, 2014). Although the majority of them (e.g. Saraiki, Urdu, Sindhi, Pashto and Punjabi) use the Perso-Arabic script, there

are clear differences between them. As a result, readers of one language may not be able to read the other easily (Scriptsource, n.d.).

Pakistan has parallel education systems. Three of the most common schooling systems in Pakistan are government boards affiliated matriculation schools (which lead to secondary school certificates), British Council affiliated O level schools, and madaris/ religious schools (Malik & Hassan, 2015). Whereas O-level schools focus on conceptual learning, matriculation schools mostly focus on cramming and rote learning (Behlol & Anwar, 2011). Even for English translation and essay writing, some translations and essays are already given in the matriculation textbooks and guides. Students only have to cram them to pass the exams (Malik et al., 2020). This, coupled with students' focus on grades than improving knowledge and skills, has led to the deterioration of education quality in general, and English in particular (Channa, 2017).

## LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Chomsky (1959) suggested that language is an innate quality of humans. Although many species can produce sounds for various purposes, combining them into a complex and highly sophisticated structure is a unique human quality (Scott-Phillips & Blythe, 2013).

A language system has three dimensions: phonology, semantics and syntax (sentence processing) (Vigneau et al., 2006); and four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Chomsky (1957) believed that listening and speaking played an important role in learning a foreign language, but reading and writing were crucial in getting adept and describing one's thoughts in words.

Researchers define writing from different perspectives. Widdowson (1978) thought that writing is an act of composing correct sentences and transmitting them on paper. Liatch (2011) pointed out that writing is the most difficult of all four skills. It is the most complicated skill for both native and non-native learners due to various factors such as grammatical structure, vocabulary, spellings, phrases, punctuations and literary devices (Harris & Cunningham, 1994; Rababah, 2003; Alkhresheh, 2010).

## INFLUENCE OF MOTHER TONGUE ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Non-native learners face many difficulties while producing any piece of writing (Kharma, 1983; Crompton, 2011). It is mostly due to multiple complicated tasks required such as planning, translating, reviewing and monitoring (Hayes et al., 1987). One of the reasons is the influence of native language or mother tongue which makes it tougher for non-native speakers to pick language structure and other components (Ferguson, 1965; Hyland & Anan, 2006; Crompton, 2011). Ferguson (1965) also mentioned that the influence of the first language, and structural differences between them are two of the biggest hurdles in second language acquisition. Kavaliauskiene (2009) found that errors-transfer by beginners while learning a foreign language was due to the lack of necessary information, and applying the rules of native language to the foreign one.

## ERRORS MADE IN ENGLISH WRITING BY NON-NATIVE STUDENTS

Literature shows that non-native students face multiple issues while writing in English. Lin (2002) analyzed 26 essays written by Taiwanese EFL college students. It shows errors in four major areas: sentence structure (30.43%), wrong form of verb (21.01%), sentence fragments (15.99%), and

wrong use of vocabulary (15.94%). In another study about Taiwanese college students by Kao (1999), the researcher scrutinized 169 assignments from 53 students with English major. It found 928 errors, with grammatical errors being the most frequent (66%).

English language students in the Middle East also face various challenges. Researchers found that Jordanian students made frequent mistakes and errors in English writing (Zughoul, 1991; Rababah, 2003). Kharma (1983), while researching about Kuwaiti high school students, found that most of the students made structural errors due to the incorrect use of tense. Another study by Kambal (1980) about Khartoum University students in Sudan, found similar results with tense, verb formation, articles, and preposition being the biggest hurdles. In their error analysis study about Saudi Arabian students, Nuruzzaman, Islam and Shuchi (2018) found that most of the errors made by the students were about the grammar, lexis, semantics and mechanics of English language.

Bhattia (1974) who did an error analysis study about Hindi-speaking university students in New Delhi, found that forms of the verb and tense-related issues made up for 40% of all the errors.

## ERRORS MADE IN ENGLISH WRITING BY PAKISTANI STUDENTS

Multiple studies show that English writing is as troublesome for Pakistani students as for other non-native students. Haider (2012) noted that teachers in Pakistan often misinterpret the notion of conscious-doing. They would focus on imitation without understanding. As a result, the students are often rendered unable to write anything creatively and independently.

Jamil et al. (2016) conducted an error-analysis study in composition writing at the postgraduate level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. They selected 90 students belonging to 6 institutions. The findings showed that 73.32% of the students made verb-tense-related errors, 63.33% spelling, 52.21% use of vocabulary, and 49.99% subject-verb-agreement ones.

Hamza et al. (2017) also conducted an error-analysis study about Pakistani undergraduate students. All the errors found were in 11 different categories with punctuation and use of verb being the most common ones. The study found two common reasons behind it: failure of the schooling system, and students' negligence and lack of self-learning. Another error analysis study about Pakistani undergraduate students was carried out by Fatima et al. (2021). The errors committed by the students were divided into three main categories: omission errors (when a word such as an article was omitted), substitution errors (when a wrong word was used e.g. adjective was used instead of adverb), and addition errors (when a word was unnecessarily used).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### RESEARCH METHOD AND APPROACH

The current study uses error analysis due to its significance in language learning. According to Crystal (1972), error analysis is the study of improper forms generated during second language learning. They are important in language learning as they provide "valuable feedbacks" (Xie & Jiang, 2007, p. 13). Error-analysis is also useful for curriculum designers and teachers as it highlights the problematic areas (Corder, 1974).

Corder (1974) described three steps in error analysis: collection of written sample, identifying the types of errors, and explaining the source of errors.

## POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population of the current study consists of all the grade 9 students studying in the federal government schools in Islamabad. There are 198 federal government high schools in Islamabad (109 schools for girls and 89 for boys). Being the federal capital, the students in those schools come from diverse lingual backgrounds. Grade 9 students were selected as they had been studying English for almost nine years through formal schooling. If any pattern was still found during the error analysis, it may suggest that the influence of the mother tongue is indelible.

The sample was taken from one girls' high school. The school had four sections IX-A, IX-B, IX-C, and IX-D with 25 students in each section. The whole group technique was used to eliminate bias. All those sections were taught by the same teacher. As a result, it also excluded the difference between teachers' expertise, skills and teaching methodologies which may influence the results. The total sample consists of 100 students. All the students were present at the time of data collection.

## DATA COLLECTION TOOL AND PROCEDURE

The students were asked to write an English essay of 100-150 words on "Electronic Media Versus Print Media". It was an unseen topic for them. They were given printed sheets with the topic printed on them, and lines for personal information i.e. name, class, section and mother tongue.

Students were seated in the main hall of the school. Usually, for a 100-150-word writing task, students are given 15 to 20 minutes. In this case, the students were given 20 minutes for this activity. One of the researchers supervised this process with the assistance of four school teachers.

## DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

Data analysis was done in three steps as suggested by Corder (1974): collection of the sample, identification of errors, and explanation of errors.

Based on the literature and their own experiences, the researchers had already created a rubric with semantic and syntactic errors as the two main categories and some sub-categories in each of them. First of all, all the written essays were collected and categorized based on their mother tongue. One of the researchers read all the essays carefully to identify and categorize the errors. They were put under main and subcategories. If a new category emerged, it was added to the list. It was counter-checked by another researcher for further validation. Then all the researchers discussed and finalized them.

## DATA FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Data findings and analysis are divided into two main parts: participants' information, and error analysis. The details and interpretations are as follows.

PARTICIPANTS' INFORMATION

The students in this study came from varied lingual backgrounds. They belonged to five different mother tongues: Punjabi (38), Pashto (17), Potohari (10), Urdu (23), and Hindko (12). All the students were girls. They were 14 to 18 years old with an average age of 14 years and 10 months.

ERROR ANALYSIS

Initially, all the errors were divided into two main categories: syntactical errors (structural and grammatical ones) and semantical errors (about the words and their meanings).

TABLE 1. Number of syntactical and semantical errors by the students with different mother tongues

| Mother Tongue | No. of Students | Syntactical Errors Total (Average) | Semantical Errors Total (Average) | All Errors Total (Average) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Punjabi | 38 | 159 (4.18) | 145 (3.82) | 304 (8) |
| Pashto | 17 | 76 (4.47) | 67 (3.94) | 143 (8.41) |
| Urdu | 23 | 123 (5.34) | 83 (3.61) | 206 (8.96) |
| Potohari | 10 | 100 (10) | 90 (9) | 190 (19) |
| Hindko | 12 | 60 (5) | 51 (4.25) | 111 (9.25) |
| Total | 100 | 518 (5.18) | 436 (4.36) | 954 (9.54) |

Table 1 shows the total number of syntactical, semantical and total errors committed by the students with different mother tongues. Average errors per student are also given. Average was calculated by dividing the total number of errors by the number of students in that group e.g. 159 (syntactical errors made by Punjabi speaking students)/ 38 (Punjabi speaking students).

The findings clearly show that all the students regardless of their mother tongue had committed more syntactical errors than semantical ones. On average, students with Punjabi mother tongue committed the least number of syntactical and total errors. In semantical errors, they were second best after Urdu-speaking students.

Interestingly out of five, four mother tongue groups (Punjabi, Pashto, Urdu and Hindko) had a similar overall performance with a range of 4.18-5.34 in syntactical, 3.61-4.25 in semantical, and 8.41-9.25 in total errors. Potohari students turned out to be an extreme case, making twice as many errors as any other group.

SYNTACTICAL ERRORS

During the analysis, five subcategories of syntactical errors were observed. Their details are given in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Types of syntactical errors by the students with different mother tongues

| Mother Tongue (Number of Students) | Subject-Verb Agreement Total (average) | Tense Total (average) | Preposition Total (average) | Punctuation Total (average) | Conjunction Total (average) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Punjabi (38) | 42 (1.1) | 72 (1.89) | 12 (0.31) | 18 (0.47) | 15 (0.39) |
| Pashto (17) | 09 (0.5) | 20 (1.17) | 14 (0.82) | 25 (1.47) | 08 (0.47) |
| Urdu (23) | 25 (1.08) | 56 (2.4) | 15 (0.65) | 17 (0.73) | 10 (0.43) |
| Potohari (10) | 22 (2.2) | 40 (4.0) | 12 (1.2) | 15 (1.5) | 11 (1.1) |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hindko (12) | 12 (1.0) | 21 (1.75) | 10 (0.83) | 13 (1.08) | 04 (0.33) |
| Total (100) | 110 (1.1) | 209 (2.09) | 63 (0.63) | 88 (0.88) | 48 (0.48) |

The first subcategory was about subject-verb-agreement. It was the second most vulnerable area for Pakistani students with 110 total errors (average of 1.1). Pashto students were the most efficient with an average of only 0.5 while Potohari students were the most vulnerable making 2.2 errors on average. Hindko, Urdu and Punjabi-speaking students showed similar performances with averages of 1, 1.08 and 1.1 respectively.

Most of the time, the students either used the wrong auxiliary verb or used s/es improperly in present indefinite tense. For example, one Urdu-speaking student wrote, "Both electronic media and print media is useful for human beings.", using "is" instead of "are". Another student with a Punjabi mother tongue wrote, "Media that deliver news", omitting the use of "s" with the lexical verb.

The second subcategory in this area was about tense-related errors. This turned out to be the most problematic syntactical issue for the students with an average of 2.09. It was the most challenging for Potohari and Urdu-speaking students with an average of 4 and 2.4 respectively. Three other groups (Punjabi, Pashto and Hindko) had almost similar averages of 1.89, 1.17 and 1.75 respectively.

The students showed a poor understanding of 'period' and tenses. One Potohari student wrote, "In the past, print media is important." Here the student used present form of the verb for past period. Another student with Punjabi mother tongue wrote, "Many Channels opened and start news programmes", using the present tense in subordinate clause instead of the past tense.

The third subcategory was about preposition. By and large, the students showed a better understanding of preposition with only 0.63 errors on average. The students with Punjabi mother tongue showed the strongest and Potohari had the weakest grip over them with 0.31 and 1.2 errors on average. Urdu-speaking students made 0.65, Pashto 0.82, and Hindko 0.83 errors on average respectively.

Most of the mistakes were related to the wrong use of prepositions. One Punjabi student wrote, "Newspapers have been published from many years." In some other cases, the preposition was either omitted altogether or put in when it was not required. One Pashto student showed it through a sentence, "Electronic media is important all people." (omitting the use of 'for').

The next category was about punctuation. Punctuation marks are very important in English writing as their improper use often changes the meaning of a sentence. Students in this study did reasonably well in them with an overall average of 0.88. The students with Punjabi mother tongue, again did the best (0.47) while Potohari the worst (1.5). Amongst all the sub-categories of syntactical errors, it turned out to be the weakest area for Pashto students who made 1.47 punctuation-related errors on average. Urdu and Hindko-speaking students made 0.73 and 1.08 errors on average respectively.

One Pashto student wrote, "In positive sense print media..." In this sentence, the student did not put a comma after the phrase "In positive sense". Similarly, one Hindko student wrote, "It is every media persons responsibility to be honest." Here the student omitted the use of apostrophe after "person".

The last subcategory in the syntactical errors was about conjunction. By and large, the students committed the least number of errors in it. Hindko students turned out to be the most efficient in the use of conjunction with an average of 0.33 while Potohari students made the highest number of errors on average (1.1). Punjabi, Pashto and Urdu-speaking students had almost similar

averages of 0.39, 0.47 and 0.43 respectively. Overall, the students made less than half an error per essay (0.48 to be exact).

Despite studying at a comparatively higher level, some of the students still showed confusion with the use of "and" and "or". One Potohari student wrote, "Print media includes newspaper, journals, magazines or electronic media like television, radio etc." Here the student should have used "and" instead of "or". Another student with Punjabi mother tongue inserted the conjunction "then" where it was not required, writing, "When media first came then it was good."

## SEMANTICAL ERRORS

There were six different types of semantical errors observed during the data analysis. They were related to number (singular/ plural form), spelling, collocation, substitution, repetition, and internet and slang language. Table 3 presents details about it.

TABLE 3. Types of semantical errors by the students with different mother tongues

| Mother Tongue (# of Students) | Number Total (Average) | Spelling Total (Average) | Collocation Total (Average) | Substitution Total (Average) | Repetition Total (Average) | Internet & Slang Language Total (Average) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Punjabi (38) | 22 (0.57) | 46 (1.2) | 29 (0.76) | 23 (0.6) | 15 (0.39) | 10 (0.26) |
| Pashto (17) | 08 (0.47) | 20 (1.17) | 19 (1.1) | 10 (0.58) | 01 (0.05) | 09 (0.53) |
| Urdu (23) | 14 (0.60) | 29 (1.26) | 17 (0.73) | 09 (0.39) | 06 (0.26) | 08 (0.34) |
| Potohari (10) | 10 (1.0) | 38 (3.8) | 16 (1.6) | 13 (1.3) | 09 (0.9) | 04 (0.4) |
| Hindko (12) | 06 (0.5) | 18 (1.5) | 13 (1.08) | 08 (0.66) | 03 (0.25) | 04 (0.25) |
| Total (100) | 60 (0.6) | 151 (1.51) | 94 (0.94) | 63 (0.63) | 34 (0.34) | 35 (0.35) |

The first subcategory of semantical errors observed in the essays was about the number (singular/ plural form). Generally, the students did not make many errors in this one with an average of 0.6. Pashto students were the most competent in this area with an average of 0.47 while Potohari ones showed the weakest grip with an average of 1. Punjabi, Urdu and Hindko-speaking students had almost similar averages with scores of 0.57, 0.60 and 0.5 respectively.

In most of the cases, the students used regular plural rules like adding "s" or "es" for irregular ones. Quite a few students, for example, used the word "childs" as the plural to child. Another issue was about the use of plural forms for uncountable nouns. One Hindko student wrote, "TV also gives advices to people."

Spelling turned out to be one of the most troublesome issues. It was the biggest subcategory in semantical errors and the second biggest overall (after tense). Pashto-speaking students showed the best command in this category closely followed by Punjabi and Urdu-speaking ones with averages of 1.17, 1.2 and 1.26. Potohari students were really poor in it with an average of 3.8.

Most of the errors in spelling were related to silent letters. Many students showed the tendency of spelling a word as per its sound. One Potohari student spelled "photo" as "foto". Another student with Hindko mother tongue wrote "wrong" as "rong".

The next subcategory was about collocation. English language has numerous groups of words which should be used together. Non-native speakers often get confused with collocation and use them with regular words. The students in this study also showed this tendency, with collocation being the second most frequent type of semantical error (average of 0.94). Urdu and Punjabi students turned out to be the most efficient with an average of 0.73 and 0.76 respectively while Potohari students were the most prone to collocation-related errors (1.6). Pashto and Hindko

students had averages of 1.1 and 1.08. Some of the wrong collocations found in the essays were "looking at TV" and "doing progress in the recent time".

The next type of semantical errors observed in the students' essays was word substitution. English language is made up of different parts of speech. Many non-native students tend to mix them up. The same pattern was observed here. The students at times used the wrong part of speech in the sentences. Urdu-speaking students showed the best command over the use of parts of speech with only 0.39 errors on average. The students with Potohari mother tongue, on the other hand, had the highest average with 1.3. Punjabi, Pashto and Hindko students had almost similar averages of 0.6, 0.58 and 0.66.

Some of the examples of wrong word substitution were "Media is becoming strongly." by a Pashto student; and "In the past, peopled keen watched TV." by a Hindko student. In the first case, the student should have used the adjective "strong" instead of the adverb "strongly". In the second one, the adverb "keenly" should have been used with the verb "watched"

The second last category was about repetition. Repetition (using the same word multiple times usually for emphasis) is usually not allowed in formal English writing. At times, the students repeated words to show emphasis. The average number of errors in this subcategory was quite low with 0.34 errors per student. Pashto students were almost flawless in this regard with an average of only 0.05 whereas the ones with Potohari mother tongue were the most prone with an average of 0.9.

Students often repeated words to show emphasis. For example, one student with Punjabi mother tongue wrote, "Now many many people use social media." Another student with Potohari mother tongue repeated words in this way, "There are different different issues in Pakistan."

The last subcategory of semantical errors was about the use of internet language and slangs in formal writing. On average, 0.35 errors were made in this. Pashto students had the highest ratio of errors with a little over half an error per essay (0.53 to be exact), while Hindko students made only 0.25 errors in every essay. Punjabi, Urdu and Potohari students made 0.26, 0.34 and 0.4 errors on average.

The students mostly used short words which are commonly used in internet chats and cell phone messaging. One Pashto student used the word "langu" for language. In another example, one Urdu-speaking student wrote "great" as "gr8", something which is very common in mobile messaging in Pakistan.

# DISCUSSION

Learning the English language, especially in the area of English writing, is quite a tricky task. Although both native and non-native speakers face challenges in it (Rababah, 2003; Alkhresheh, 2010; Almahameed & Al-Shaikhli, 2017), it is more problematic for non-natives due to the difference in structure and characteristics of the two languages (Ferguson, 1965; Hyland & Anan, 2006; Crompton, 2011). Pakistani students have shown almost similar kinds of vulnerabilities in some of the previous studies (Jamil et al., 2016; Hamza et al., 2017).

Students in Pakistan come from a diverse lingual background. As those languages and mother tongues vary in nature, patterns, semantics and syntactic; their influences on English language learning and especially writing may also vary. This error analysis study has been carried out to find out any similarities or differences in error-making by Pakistani students with different mother tongues. 100 grade 9 students with five different mother tongues (Punjabi, Pashto, Urdu,

Potohari and Hindko) were selected from a public school in Islamabad to find any such pattern. If any pattern is found, the study can suggest the teachers teaching the students with those mother tongues to especially focus on those weaker areas.

The study clearly shows that all the Pakistani students regardless of their mother tongue had committed more syntactical errors than semantical ones. Previous studies also supported this (Jamil et al., 2016; Hamza et al., 2017).

In syntactical errors, there were quite a lot of similarities amongst the students belonging to different mother tongues. Although the intensity level (frequency of errors) was different, they had a lot of similarities in the pattern. Other than Pashto-speaking, all other groups were the most vulnerable to tense-related issues. This is not surprising as literature also says that tense-related issues trouble students the most (Bhattia, 1974; Kambal, 1980; Jamil, Majoka, & Kamran, 2016). Pashto students, on the other hand, committed the highest number of punctuation errors. It may make some sense as although all five mother tongues are part of the Indo-European language family (and the Indo-Iranian sub-category); contrary to the other four mother tongues which are part of the the Indo-Aryan family, Pashto falls into the the Iranian group (Violatti, 2014). This difference may be one of the contributing factors behind this difference in the pattern. When it comes to the second most problematic area, even fewer similarities were observed with three of the lingual groups (Punjabi, Urdu and Potohari) struggling in subject-verb-agreement. It has been a difficult area for the Pakistani students with Jamil et al. (2016) finding that almost half of the students in their study made errors relating to subject-verb-agreement. The second most problematic area for Pashto students was about tense, while Hindko students showed the second-highest number of punctuation errors. In English writing, tense, subject-verb-agreement and punctuation turned out to be the top three troublesome syntactical areas for the students under study. Non-native speakers throughout the world have shown similar tendencies (Bhattia, 1974; Kambal, 1980; Alamin & Ahmed, 2012; Jamil et al., 2016). Overall, Potohari students made almost twice as many syntactical errors as any other group.

There were also similarities in the least problematic syntactical subcategories. For example, four out of five mother tongue groups (Pashto, Urdu, Potohari and Hindko) made the least number of errors in conjunction. It could be because conjunctions are comparatively fewer in numbers, and also comparatively similar in nature and pattern as in the mother tongues mentioned in the study.

In semantical errors, the similarities between the groups were even more prominent. Spelling and collocation were the top two problematic areas for all the groups regardless of the mother tongues. The literature also supports it with numerous articles citing the issues and challenges that non-native speakers face in English spelling and collocation (Ehri, 2005; Toba, Noor, & Sanu, 2019). Literature mentions that learning spelling depends on the readers' knowledge about the alphabetical system (Ehri, 2005). As English alphabets are completely different from the alphabets used in Pakistani languages and mother tongues, that unfamiliarity with letters and their lexical arrangements is likely to make the Pakistani students vulnerable in these areas. Even the area with the third-highest number of semantical errors was the same for four mother tongue groups (substitution being the third most problematic area for Punjabi, Pashto, Potohari and Hindko students).

There were more differences in the least problematic area as Pashto, Urdu and Hindko-speaking showed the strongest grip on repetition while Punjabi and Hindko ones tackled the issue of internet and slang language most efficiently.

This study has found that students with the same mother tongue have committed similar types of syntactical and semantical errors with patterned similarities and frequencies. Overall, they were the most vulnerable in tense, spelling and subject-verb-agreement with Pashto students being especially weak in punctuation. Despite some differences, the students with different mother tongues generally showed similar patterns (strengths and weaknesses in similar areas) and frequencies. Potohari students committed the highest number of errors across the areas.

The findings suggest that the error-making of Pakistani students in English writing is due to the influence of their mother tongue as three of the most problematic areas (tense, spelling and subject-verb-agreement) suggest. Pakistani languages and English have completely different tense patterns and structures. For example, although both Urdu and English have three periods (past, present and future); in Urdu, past period has six tense types (as compared to four in English). In the same way, the pattern and structure of subject-verb-agreement in Pakistani mother tongues are different from that in English. Even in spelling, differences between Pakistani mother tongues and English are immense. Almost all of the Pakistani mother tongues use the Perso-Arabic writing style and the letters are borrowed from Arabic and Persian while English is influenced by Latin script. As a result, Pakistani learners may find learning Arabic and Persian a lot easier than learning English. It can be said with certainty that the differences in the structure and alphabets of these mother tongues could be the main reason behind committing errors in English writing. Such errors are difficult to address if teachers teach in a generalized way. They must identify the weak areas and then specifically focus on improving them.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study comes up with the following recommendations.

- The teachers must focus more on tense, spelling and subject-verb-agreement as the students are generally weaker in those areas.
- Those who are teaching Potohari and Pashto-speaking students must give them additional time for punctuation.
- Potohari students should be provided with extra classes for English to bring them on par with the other students.
- English teachers teaching students with different mother tongues should be specially trained to meet their special needs.

Despite being taught English from grade one, Pakistani students often lack creative and critical skills in English writing. It may be partly due to the examination system which is rooted in rote-learning, and partly to teachers' inability to identify the specialized needs of the students. Students from different mother tongues have their own specific issues and challenges in the acquisition of any foreign language. Although most of the teacher education programmes and training sessions include the teaching of English, they are mostly theoretical and not custom-developed for Pakistani students' needs. There should be a specific focus to educate and train Pakistani teachers to teach English as a second language, keeping in mind diverse challenges arising due to the influence of different mother tongues.

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