WRITING CHALLENGES OF BANGLADESHI TERTIARY LEVEL EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The present paper reports the findings about paragraph writing challenges of the Bangladeshi tertiary level EFL learners. Data were collected through questionnaire distributed to 43 learners majoring in English Language and Literature in International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh. Findings from the questionnaires revealed that Bangladeshi EFL learners have problems in all the three stages of writing English paragraphs. Writing stage is the most difficult stage followed by revising and planning stages of writing paragraphs. Among all the sub stages of writing paragraphs, using idioms tops the list of the writing challenges followed by using appropriate vocabulary and using antonym. Brainstorming appears as the least difficult sub stage for the loaners. Among the three types of paragraphs, writing comparison and contrast paragraph is the most difficult followed by writing cause and effect paragraph and writing listing paragraph. The implications are provided following the needs of the learners.

Keywords: Paragraph writing, Bangladeshi EFL learners, tertiary learners, writing challenges, different types of paragraphs

INTRODUCTION

English is a global language (Nunan 2003) as well as a lingua franca of the present world (Hossain 2013;Jenkin, Cogo & Dewy 2011) and one of the commonly learnt languages in any country of the world. It is considered as second or foreign language and is in a position to fulfill the needs of people. While some learners learn the English language for the sake of learning the language, others learn the language for specific needs, that is- English for Specific purpose (ESP). With the passage of time, learning English for Specific purpose (ESP) has been so divergent that different fields such as English for Academic Purpose (EAP), English for Science and Technology (EST), Business English, Technical English, Scientific English and Aviation English were developed. Hossain (2013) observes that learners who attend formal educational settings – for example, schools, colleges and universities- learn English for Academic Purpose (EAP). They try to learn all the four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing- of the language, out of which writing is deemed to be the most difficult skill.

In this globalised world of business and scholarship, writing skill in English has enormous importance for understanding disciplinary knowledge and for establishment in career (Hyland 2013). Most of the subject areas such as business, science, technology, law, arts, social science are written in English language following the convention of the writing skill in English.

Therefore, expression of acquired knowledge in any subject is impossible without good knowledge in writing skill in English. Similarly, establishment in career demands an effective writing skill in English of a job seeker. Starting from applying for a job, hunting the job, retention of the job and job related communication demand good writing skill in English. While writing skill in English has all these needs based benefits to offer, a learner needs to learn the skill in a formal instructional setting to develop mastery of the target language (TL) skill.

Though a learner has strong need to learn the writing skill, developing mastery in the target language skill, in this respect writing skill in English, is not easy. A learner has to face different problems. The problems of all ESL/EFL learners in the way of developing writing skill in English are not the same.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies (Afrin 2016, Rass 2015, Keong & Mussa 2015, Mustaque 2014, Elraggas 2014, Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova 2014, Khansir & Ahrami 2014, Hammad 2014, Al-Khairy 2013, Javid, Farooq, & Umer 2013, Al Fadda 2012, Nazim & Ahmad 2012,) have looked into the problems of paragraph and essay writing in different contexts using different instruments, for example- writing samples of the learners, questionnaire and interview. Most of the published studies looked into the problems of writing through checking writing samples of the learners. However, a number of studies (Afrin 2016; Yuen & Mussa 2015; Mustaque 2014; Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova 2014; Hammad 2014; Al-Khairy 2013; Javid, Farooq, & Umer 2013; Al Fadda 2012; Farooq, Hassan, & Wahid 2012) have tried to find out the writing problems EFL learners in English using questionnaire.

The above mentioned studies pointed out the writing problems focusing on different aspects of writing in English. Afrin (2016) employed questionnaire of eleven close ended questions to collect data about writing problems from 89 undergraduate learners studying at a private university in Bangladesh. The study found that 88% of the learners do not have sufficient command over sentence structure in English, followed by lack of confidence to express ideas by 74% learners and use of no prewriting technique by 63% learners and no concern about organization by 66% learners. Yuen and Mussa (2015) found language problems and organization problems through the responses of the questionnaires filled in by 30 post-graduate Iraqi learners studying at a university in Malaysia and through the interviews with 6 learners. The study found language problems and organizational problems among other problems of writing with the learners. Like Yuen and Mussa (2015), Mustaque (2014) too found the problems of grammar, vocabulary and organization among the 140 undergraduate learners studying at two different universities at Chittagong region in Bangladesh. On the other hand, Al-Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) made a comparative study of the writing problems of the learners studying at schools and universities. Among the five writing problems sorted out in the study, both the groups of learners mentioned maintaining cohesion and writing correct sentence as the fourth and fifth problems. Among the other problems, though different in chronological order between school and university learners, how to start a paragraph or essay, vocabulary and development of idea or content are mentioned as the problems. Hammad (2014) also found the problems of grammar, vocabulary, content and cohesion as the problems through the

questionnaire responses from 60 university learners in Palestine. In the same way, Al Khairy's (2013) study on 75 English major learners at a university in Saudia found the problems of vocabulary, grammar, use of irregular verbs, use of preposition, spelling, use of article, punctuation, use of question words as the problems through the findings of questionnaires. The problems of vocabulary and grammar are reported by the study of Javid, Farooq, & Umer (2013) too. The study of Javid, Farooq, & Umer (2013) also reported the problem of organization in addition to problems of vocabulary and grammar problems. The study of Al Fadda (2012) found some more grammatical problems unlike the findings of the other studies through the questionnaire responses from 50 post graduate students studying at a university in Saudia Arabia. This study pointed out the problems of use of plague words and phrases, reviewing grammar, use of pronoun, problem of agreement between pronoun and antecedents, subject verb agreement, sentence fragments and difficulty of combining sentences. Like Al Khairy's (2013) findings, Farooq, Hassan, & Wahid (2012) found the problems of vocabulary, grammar and spelling as the problems of the 12th graders studying in Pakistan. This study reported the problems of using comma, L1 interference too as the problems in writing in English.

The above reviewed studies found a number of problems related to the learners' writing in different contexts. The writing problems include mechanical problem, lack of pre writing technique, problem of sentence structure, vocabulary problem, cohesion problem, L1 interference and the problem of content development. The challenges are at word level, sentence level, grammatical level and organizational.

Among the studies mentioned above, Afrin's (2016) and Mustaque's (2014) findings in Bangladesh context reflect Shamsuzzaman and Everatt's (2013:71) comment that Bangladeshi tertiary level EFL learners fail to come up with minimal writing competence and refer to writing skill among the Bangladeshi learners as "seriously flawed". Afrin (2016) proposes to include the learners of more private universities to elicit richer data about the Bangladeshi learners' writing problems. Mustaque (2014) also observes that Bangladeshi EFL learners do not have knowledge about writing standard paragraphs and essays and proposes to conduct more studies to find out writing problems so that attempts can be taken for improving the writing ability of the Bangladeshi EFL learners.

To have more improvement in writing ability and considering the complexity of writing an essay, a longer piece of composition and a composition of many paragraphs, attempt should be taken to focus on paragraph writing first. According to Gugin (2014), paragraph is at the second stage of the three staged written academic discourses, followed by sentence level mastery at the first stage and preceded by essay writing at the third stage. Focusing on finding problems of paragraph writing facilitates the teacher to move back to sentence and forth to essay.

The problems faced by the learners in different contexts are also faced by the Bangladeshi EFL learners. My experience as a teacher of writing skill coupled with observations shared by my colleagues point to the writing problems of the Bangladeshi EFL learners in general and the learner of International Islamic University Chittagong in particular. This is the concern of this study.

The present study places itself as an extension of and in line with Afrin (2016) and Mustaque's (2014) studies about identifying English writing problems. Moreover, Afrin (2016) and Mustaque (2014) investigated the writing problems of EFL learners majoring in other subjects other than in English. The data of this paper were collected from the EFL learners majoring in English Language and Literature with a view to developing a richer repertoire of English writing problems in an EFL context like Bangladesh. Therefore, the present study formulates the following objective.

The objective of the paper is to identify the writing problems the Bangladeshi EFL learners encounter when they write the different types of paragraphs in English.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs quantitative approach to identify the writing problems of the Bangladeshi tertiary level EFL learners. The quantitative approach helps to collect data from a large sample within a short time.

Questionnaire

Ahmed's (2010) questionnaire was adopted for the present study through some changes in it. The questionnaire is supplemented by the background information questionnaire designed by the researcher.

The paragraph writing problem questionnaire contains 25 statements in a 5 points likert scale ranging from – "very difficult" to "very easy". The questionnaire encompasses the problems related with planning, writing and revising stages of writing a paragraph in English and about the degree of problems of the three types of paragraphs- listing, comparison-contrast and cause and effect.

Participants

The participants of the study are 43 in number who have registered the course named –"ENG-1212" (Basic Writing) of second semester in the department of English language and literature in International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh. As part of the course the students learn how to write different types of paragraphs. Before they received lessons on writing paragraphs, their perceptions about their problems in writing paragraphs were identified.

Data Collection and Analysis

Questionnaire data were collected during the gap period of the learners. The learners were informed of the study in the previous class and were asked to remain present at this period. Forty three learners remained present in the class room. The paragraph writing problem questionnaires were distributed among the learners. The researcher himself was present in the class room at the time of filling in the questionnaire so that he could clarify before the learners in case of any confusion regarding the statements in the questionnaire.

The data of the questionnaire were analyzed descriptively using SPSS 16. After descriptive statistics, MS Excel 2007 was used to determine the ranking of the paragraph writing problems.

RESULTS

The findings of the questionnaires are demonstrated descriptively under four categories in the four tables. The tables show the mean, median and ranking of the questionnaire items under four categories.

Table 1 below shows that the different sub stages of the planning stage gradually becomes difficult for the Bangladeshi EFL learners. The difficulty starts with "brainstorming the topic of the paragraph", which has the mean score of 2.79. That is at the very beginning of paragraph writing, the learners find difficulty in paragraph writing which gradually goes up and culminates at "Organizing the ideas according to type of paragraph" with a mean score of 3.67. The Bangladeshi EFL Learners face difficulty in overall planning of paragraph writing before their paragraph writing starts. The overall mean of the planning sub stages which is 3.21 indicates that the learners of Bangladeshi EFL context face problem before they opt for writing the paragraph.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and ranking of the items of Planning stage

	mean	SD	Ranking
Organizing the ideas according to type of paragraph	3.67	0.64	1
Planning according to the features of paragraph	3.26	0.79	2
Planning interesting ideas to my topic	3.19	0.98	3
Generating relevant ideas to my topic	3.14	0.71	4
Brainstorming the topic of the paragraph	2.79	0.83	5
	3.21		

The difficulty of planning stage continues in the writing stage and goes up to a great extent as Table 2 below portrays. The writing stage of the Bangladeshi EFL learners appears to have highest difficulty standing at a mean score of 3.62. The sub stages of the writing stage fall below 1 standard deviation (SD) which indicates that all the stages are difficult and in terms of level of difficulty all the sub stages are near to each other. Additionally, the vocabulary related sub stages for example, idiom, vocabulary, synonym, antonym and word collocation are mostly at the top of

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and ranking of the items of Writing stage

	mean	SD	Ranking
Using idioms	4.00	0.69	1
Using the most appropriate word/ vocabulary in a paragraph	3.84	0.92	2
Using antonyms	3.79	0.80	3
Using reference ties in the writing	3.77	0.75	4
Using synonyms	3.72	0.96	5

	mean	SD	Ranking
Writing grammatically correct sentences in paragraph	3.70	0.86	6
Using word collocation	3.65	0.84	7
Using substitution to make the written text cohesive	3.58	0.91	8
Developing topic sentence into a complete paragraph	3.58	0.79	8
Linking sentences using appropriate cohesive devices / linking words	3.58	0.85	8
Writing a good concluding sentence for the paragraph	3.53	0.96	9
Writing a good topic sentence for paragraph	3.44	0.93	10
Using ellipsis (contracted form) smoothly while writing paragraph	3.44	0.85	10
Using the appropriate layout in writing a paragraph (centering the title indenting the first line)	3.05	0.95	11
	3.62		

the list and the sentence related sub stages for example, writing correct sentence, topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence mostly tend to be less difficult. The sub stage related with the structure of the paragraph, that is "Using appropriate layout in writing a paragraph (centering the title and indenting the first line" appears as the least difficult sub stage with a mean score of 3.05. The Bangladeshi EFL learners' difficulties of all the sub stages of the writing stage comes down broadly from word level to the sentence level with the difficulty of sentence level grammaticality at the sixth position.

Table 3 shows the descriptive findings of revising stage. The third stage of writing a paragraph is revising stage which is more difficult for the Bangladeshi EFL learners than the planning stage and less difficult than the writing stage. The overall mean score of the revising stage is 3.33 which also indicates the degree of difficulty of revising for the Bangladeshi learners.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and ranking of the items of the Revising stage

	mean	SD	Ranking
Revising the cohesion of paragraph	3.42	0.63	1
Revising the coherence of paragraph	3.30	0.67	2
Revising the unity of paragraph	3.26	0.76	3

Among the overall mean scores of the three stages, writing stage has the highest mean score at 3.62 followed by the mean score of revising stage at 3.33 and the least difficult stage is planning with the lowest overall mean score at 3.21. All the mean scores of the three stages fall between 3 and 4 which indicate the overall difficulty of all the three stages.

In addition to the three stages of writing a paragraph, the fourth category of items were included to know level of difficulty in terms of writing three types of paragraphs. Table 4 demonstrates that "writing a listing paragaph" is the least difficult for the Bangladeshi learners

Table 4: Descriptive statistics and ranking of the three types of paragraphs in terms of difficulty

	mean	SD	Ranking	
Writing a cause & effect paragraph	3.26	1.00	1	
Writing a comparison-contrast paragraph	3.60	0.76	2	
Writing a listing paragraph	3.12	0.76	3	
	3.33			

with mean score of 3.12 and "writing a comparison-contrast paragraph" is the most difficult stage. The mean scores of all the items are above 3 and the overall mean score of the revising stage at 3.33 indicates the difficulty of writing any type of paragraph for the Bangladeshi EFL learners.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to identify the writing problems the Bangladeshi EFL learners encounter when they write the different types of paragraphs in English. The findings of the descriptive statistics of the questionnaires point to the overall difficulty of paragraph writing for the learners. The findings of the sub stages of the three stages are in line with the findings of the previous studies.

The findings of "brainstorming the topic of the paragraph" of the pre writing stage are mostly in tandem with findings of Ahmed (2010). In Ahmed's (2010) study, 67% respondents referred to brainstorming as a difficult strategy. Similarly, the findings of the present study about idea generation are consistent with Ahmed's (2010) findings that 50% of his study sample found idea generation difficult. Again, this study has similar findings regarding planning idea like Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014). In the study of Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014), school students considered the idea development as the third writing problem and university students considered it as the first problem. Furthermore, the findings about the organizational problems of paragraph writing corroborate with the findings of Afrin (2016), Yuen and Mussa (2015), Javid, Farooq and Umer (2013) and Mustaque (2014). In Afrin (2016), 66% respondents at the university did not express any concern about maintaining organization in writing a paragraph which reflects the organizational problems pointed out in Yuen and Mussa (2015), and Javid, Farooq and Umer (2013) to a great extent and partially with the findings of Mustaque (2014). In the study of Mustaque (2014), only 13% of the learners pointed to their inability to organize ideas in writing which needs further study. Finally, the findings about overall difficulty of the planning stage support the findings of Afrin (2016). In the study of Afrin (2016), 63% learners mentioned that they do not use any prewriting technique before writing.

Like the findings of the preliminary stage, the findings of the writing stage difficulties of this study are also in line with the findings of the previous studies. The findings of the vocabulary related problems of the current study support the findings regarding the difficulty of

vocabulary of   Yuen and Mussa (2015), Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014), Hammad (2014), Ankawi (2015), Al Khairy (2013), Javid, Farooq and Umer (2013), Al Fadda (2012), and Farooq, Hassan and Wahid (2012). The findings of this study about the difficulty of grammar are also consistent with the findings of Yuen and Mussa (2015), Hammad (2014), Al Khairy (2013), Al Fadda (2012), Javid, Farooq and Umer (2013), Farooq, Hassan and Wahid (2012) and Ahmed (2010). In Afrin's (2016) study too, 88% learners noted the difficulty of sentence structure in English. Again, the results of this study about the use of synonym, antonym, idiom, word collocation, ellipsis, substitution and reference tie are congruent with the findings of Ahmed (2010). Furthermore, the findings of this study about the complexities of writing topic sentence, supporting sentences, developing topic sentence into a complete paragraph, and writing a concluding sentence corroborate the findings of Ahmed (2010). Additionally, the findings of this study about the difficulty of the third stage i.e. revising stage of the Bangladeshi learners in writing a paragraph reflect the findings of Ahmed (2010).

In sum, the findings about the difficulties of the three stages of writing a paragraph are consistent with the findings of the previous studies. This consistency indicates that the problems the Bangladeshi EFL learners encounter in writing a paragraph are remarkably similar to the challenges the learners in different contexts encounter.

In addition to different problems of writing a paragraph under three categories- planning, writing and revising, the questionnaire of the current study incorporated items on three types of paragraphs. Among the three types of paragraphs, learners mentioned listing as the least difficult and comparison-contrast as the most difficult. It can be assumed that writing listing paragraph is easy for the learners because it needs mere listing of some points or ideas. On the other hand, writing comparison- contrast and cause and effect paragraphs are difficult because in these two types of paragraphs a writer has to move from one set of idea to another set of idea and has to link all the ideas. Consequently, these two latter types of paragraphs appear more difficult.

The paper has pedagogical implications for writing teachers, institutional administrators and policy makers. The teachers will come to know some of the writing problems their learners are facing in writing a paragraph. The teachers should focus on following the stages of writing in case of teaching the paragraph writing. They should also focus on different features of different types of paragraphs because different types of features are entailed in different types of paragraphs. Furthermore, the teachers should take attempts to help the learners enrich their vocabulary, idiom, word collocation and ellipsis because all these features make a written composition more reader friendly. Again, the teachers should clarify the grammatical problems to the learners; otherwise, they will be repeating the same mistakes. Additionally, the teachers and curriculum designers should note that paragraph writing should start from the least difficult to difficult gradually. In addition to all these, the institutional administrators and policy makers should develop training based on the needs of the learners to ensure that the learners can develop writing ability. The policy makers and educators will get the benefits of the paper as sources for bringing about changes in the course curriculum, allocation of time schedule and above all to bring changes in the education policy.

Finally, the present paper will give important results for the learners, teachers, educators and policy makers to know the writing problems so as to adopt necessary steps to help the

learners for writing paragraphs and for the betterment of the Bangladeshi EFL learners' writing proficiency.

The study will help the learners to know their writing problems which will ultimately contribute to improve the writing ability. Similarly teachers will be highly benefitted by the knowledge of the learners' writing problems in details and the study will be a helpful means to help the learners further improve the writing ability.

The paper has some limitations in terms of sample, instruments and task type. If the samples were drawn from other institutional settings, the paper might have given different results. As paragraph writing is a generally practiced writing task in schools and colleges too, a study done at schools and colleges might have yielded different findings. Moreover, the written samples of the learners would have richer information about the problems of writing paragraph.

For future research this paper proposes to include more educational settings, for example- school, college and other tertiary instates and to have more instruments, for example- written samples of the learners, stimulated recall protocols and retrospective interview for developing richer data about the writing problem of the Bangladeshi EFL learners.

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