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### ANALYSIS OF MORPHOLOGICAL AND SYNTACTIC ERRORS IN THE WRITINGS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITY OF MALAKAND

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#### ABSTRACT

The objectives of the current study were to identify and examine the errors in the writings of the undergraduate students of the Departments of English. The current study was quantitative in nature, a sample of thirty eight papers of one subject of the 8th semester were selected for examination through the purposive sampling technique. Corder's (1974) analytical framework was used to analyze data. After analysis of the data, the researcher identified five types of errors in the writings of the undergraduate students. The five kinds were: errors in punctuation, spelling, articles, tenses, and prepositions. The findings illustrated that majority of students made errors in comma, capitalization, indefinite article, present indefinite tense and wrong substitution of preposition. It is obvious that the students are weak in the use of mechanics of writing. The results also depicted that the overall performance of female students was very good, and they made fewer errors in their writings as compared to male students. It is also obvious that existing curriculum in the department does not help the

students to overcome their errors. It is suggested that students should read more and identify the areas where they are weak to overcome such errors.

## INTRODUCTION

Pakistan uses English as the official language of the country, but people still have numerous problems with writing. It takes hours to master a particular language at an early age. The case is completely different even after obtaining official status. People in Pakistan consider English much better than their own languages and use it as a foreign language. Very few people use English as their native language or second language in Pakistan. English writing is evident from the four basic language skills. One of the reasons is the examination process, as university students are required to write in the English language during examinations to demonstrate the learning they have done during lectures. Bachelor's degree students are not able to demonstrate their competence even after completing upper secondary education. The student's knowledge and competence in writing are not up to par.

In Pakistan, several public and private sector universities offer compulsory courses related to the English language other than core courses. They offer such courses to enhance English language writing competence. These courses help them a lot in enhancing their level of expertise for social, academic, personal, and professional purposes. They get very less positive feedback from students and the main reason is their origin and first language interference. One of the reasons for this situation is their focus on key courses, which prevents students from paying proper attention to the English language course. They want to clear the exam by the passing marks. Such a negative attitude of students towards English leads to limited progress in society as English has become a basic need in our country. The need is for both writing and speaking purposes. The reason for such an attitude may be the role of the teacher. The teacher does not motivate the students to study the English language for the purpose of writing, and with little or no motivation, they are incredibly stressed in the lectures.

The University of Malakand is a public sector university in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. Here, the medium of instruction is English. In all the teaching departments of the University, English is taught as a compulsory subject in four semesters. Furthermore, in the Department of English, equal weightage is given to English literature and linguistics along with other relevant subjects. However, it has been reported by teachers and by employers in the vicinity that students make glaring mistakes in their writing skills.

It was the main stimulus behind the study to investigate the types of errors students, especially the students of BS of English, make in their writings. For this purpose, papers of the final semester students were selected to investigate errors when they are in the final stages of completion of their degree.

The current study investigates errors in the writings of eighth semester students of the Department of English, University of Malakand. Papers of the

final term exam are examined to highlight quantitatively the types of errors of male and female students. Coder's (1974) error analysis has been used as an analytical and theoretical framework in the study. The data is analyzed through an Excel sheet and the results are presented in tabulated and graphical forms. The study will help students, teachers, and policymakers in the university to overcome the shortcomings not only in the curriculum but also in the teaching methodologies of the teachers. The current research study focuses on the following research objectives:

1. To identify English writing errors of the undergraduate students of the Department of English
2. To examine English writing errors of male and female students in the Department of English

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Writing is important because it is used in both higher education and business. If students are unable or lack the ability how to express themselves in writing, they will face difficulty to communicate well with professors, employers, peers, or anybody else. Plenty of professional communication is done in writing: reports, e-mails, proposals, applications, memos, preliminary interviews and most parts of the life of a college student or successful graduate (Walsh, 2010).

Writing is a highly complicated task and writing in a second language makes the task even more difficult as it demands adequate command over the second language to complete all the formalities; composing and developing logical ideas, which are significant for a written text to be comprehensible (Sarfraz, 2011). According to Jamil, Majoka, and Kamran (2016), writing is the trickiest ability for second language learners or foreigners to master. The difficulties exist not only in the creation and organization of ideas; converting and translating these ideas into readable text is the most complex phenomenon. This complex and trickiest nature of writing play role in learners' errors.

An error, according to Ellis (1994), is "a deviation from the norm of the target language." He also says that "an error (in a technical sense) takes place when the deviation arises as a result of lack of knowledge" (p.51). Similarly, Crystal (1999) opines that "errors are considered to be a systematic, governed by rules, and appear because a learner's knowledge of the rules of the target language is incomplete" (p. 108).

Errors, according to Corder (1967), can be significant in three ways: (1) they gave the teacher information on how much the learner had learned, (2) they gave the researcher with evidence of how language was learned, and (3) they were used as a tool for a learner to discover the target language's rules. Similarly, it has been stated that second language errors are not caused by defective imitation. On the other hand, they are seemed to be evidence of a

learner's attempt to learn a new system of language to which the learner is exposed (Gass, Behney, & Plonsky, 2020).

A variety of research studies have been carried out to determine the errors made by second language learners when writing in English. Such as, some studies try to find distinct types of errors in learners' diverse types of writing, containing sentences, paragraphs, essays, and abstracts.

Sermsook, Liamnimit, and Pochakorn (2017) in their research study claim that Thai EFL students made seventeen types of errors in writing English sentences. The errors at the sentence level contain punctuation, word order, fragments, tenses, and subject-verb agreement. The errors at the word level include spelling, articles, word choices, and preposition and transition words, respectively.

According to the finding of Al-Khasawneh (2014), the students of Ajloun National University have committed certain errors when writing English paragraphs such as subject-verb agreements, spelling, wrong use of grammar, wrong use of articles and word order..

Amnuai (2020) points out five distinct types of errors in the research project abstract of Thai undergraduate students were word choice, singular/plural forms, prepositions, sentence problems, and quotation marks.

Brown (2000) says that the learner performs errors. He also says that these errors can be observed, analyzed, and classified to reveal something about the system operating within the learner. It's called error analysis. Gass et al. (2020) define "error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make" (p. 102).

Hasyim (2004) points out "Error analysis is a technique for identifying, classifying, and systematically interpreting the unacceptable form produced by someone learning a foreign language" (p. 42). According to James (2013), "Error analysis is the study of linguistic ignorance, the investigation of what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance" (p. 62). He also says that "Error analysis is the process of determining the incidence, nature, cause and consequences of unsuccessful Language" (p. 1). Crystal (1999) notes that "error analysis in language teaching and learning, the study of the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language" (p. 108).

Error Analysis, for the teaching and learning process, is valuable and helpful. It aids the teacher in identifying the students' errors, the reason for their occurrence, and how these errors can be corrected and avoided (Amnuai, 2020). According to the study by Hasyim (2004), error analysis can be used (a) to determine how well someone understands a language, (b) to determine how someone learns a language, and (c) to obtain information about the most typical obstacles encountered when learning a language.

The English language is used as an international language and is taught as a second language in many nations across the world. It is also used as the medium of instruction and a compulsory subject in many nations of the world (Khan & Khan, 2016). According to Akram and Mahmood (2007), English is used as the co-official language in Pakistan and students learn it as a second language.

Similarly, Akhtar, and Munir (2021) in their research study explain that English has become important because it is an academic and official language in Pakistan. Many Pakistani institutions use it as a medium of instruction in schools, colleges, and universities. They also say that English has been made an important subject in all types of syllabuses by the Pakistan education commission.

In the Pakistani context, it is important to master writing skills because the performance evaluation in schools, colleges and universities is done through writing. Students' ability in other skills depends on their writing. The grades and achievements are awarded based on writing skills (Akhtar & Munir, 2021).

A variety of research studies show that students in Pakistan confront various difficulties when learning English as a second language. Due to these difficulties they make errors in writing. Mehmood (2019) tells in their research study that the undergraduate students at Government College University Lahore, Pakistan committed various errors in writing. These errors include spelling errors, mixing of tenses, capitalization, wrong use of grammar, wrong use of punctuation marks, missing of light verbs, and use of slang expressions and wrong use of articles.

Iqbal, Zafran, Shahzad, Javed, and Mukhtiar (2021) in their research study analyze the English essays of secondary-level students that belong to Multan, Punjab. In his research study, they found various errors committed by these students were issues related to the use of nouns, singularity and plurality, pronouns, verbs, placement of adverbs, mistakes in spellings and improper use of articles.

Shaikh and Jibrán (2020) find out several types of errors in the intermediate medical students studying at the government college of Sindh, Pakistan in their writing essays. Students committed several types of errors in spelling, subject-verb agreement, singular/plural, verb tense, capitalization, preposition, infinitive, article, word order, nouns, and possessive case.

Further, the study by Anbar and Samad (2022) show different types of errors made by the student of public and private colleges in writing English paragraph at the intermediate level in Kohat, KP. The errors they identified were Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, article, preposition, subject-verb agreement, inappropriate sentences, singular-plural, verb, conjunction, and tenses.

Jamil et al. (2016) state that the most common errors made by the ninety students of six institutes of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, KP were use of incorrect forms of verbs, use of present tense instead of past tense, spelling errors, inappropriate usage of vocabulary and subject-verb agreement.

In our schools, colleges, and universities English is learned as a second language. Despite having spent 14-16 years in these educational institutions, the students are weak in English, especially in writing skills and the level of English proficiency is far from satisfactory (Sarfraz, 2011). Especially in the researcher context that is specified in the University of Malakand and Pakistan in general it is important to master writing skills. It is because the student's grades, awards, and achievements are awarded based on writing skills. On the other hand, the student's performance is low in writing and far from satisfactory even though they have spent 4 years in the Department of English. They are students in their eighth semester and still, they commit errors in writing. Committing errors in writing compels the researcher to conduct research in this area to find out the types of errors committed by the undergraduate students of the Department of English and give suggestions to the concerned authorities to implement these suggestions in the syllabus. Due to these suggestions, the issues would be targeted and encountered because if students at this level commit errors it shows that something is missing in curriculum and classroom practices.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The overall methodological structure of the study involves the research design of the study that is quantitative in nature, the population and sample size, sample technique, data collection procedure and research procedure. In the current study, Carder's (1974) procedure of error analysis has been selected. The actual population is the students of the morning shift of the Department of English at the University of Malakand. In the morning shift, there are a total of 151 students both male and female. The ratio of males is 49 percent which makes a total of seventy-four students while the female ratio is 51 percent which makes a total of seventy-seven students of the entire population. The researcher is almost unable to study all the students of the English Department, so he selected the students of eighth semester by using the purposive sampling technique. The sample size of the current study is a specific sample size that consists of a total of thirty-eight students (male and female) in the eighth semester, Department of English. The researcher has collected data from the answer sheets of eighth semester students' final term paper, Department of English. The researcher minutely studied the answer sheets and identified five types of errors committed by the students chosen as the sample.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

The researcher minutely studied the collected data and identified five types of errors committed by the students of the eighth semester. These errors include errors in punctuations, errors in spellings, errors in articles, errors in tenses, and errors in prepositions. These errors are further classified into sub-categories. The punctuation errors are sub-categorized into comma, colon,

quotation, period, and semicolon. The spelling errors are sub-categorized into capitalization, vowel substitution, vowel omission, consonant substitution, consonant omission, and letter reversals. The errors in articles are sub-categorized into a definite article and indefinite article. The tense errors are sub-categorized into present tense and past tense. In last, preposition errors are sub-categorized into preposition omission, wrong substitution, and unnecessary insertion of a preposition. In this chapter, the frequency and percentage of all these errors committed by the students of the eighth semester are presented in the form of tables and graphs.

### *Classification of Errors*

The errors have been divided into the following categories:

#### *Punctuation*

Punctuation marks are fourteen in number. In the English language, the most common punctuation marks are full stop, comma, colon, quotation marks, and semicolon. Punctuation plays key role in proficient writing. According to Lukeman (2007) , punctuation is quite difficult and tricky to use. Students often misused punctuation marks in their writing. The most common misused punctuation marks in the writing of the students of the eighth semester are shown in table 1.

**Table 1:** Total Errors in Punctuation

No.	Errors Classification	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Comma	397	36%
2.	Colon	361	33%
3.	Quotation	134	12%
4.	Full Stop	122	11%
5.	Semicolon	79	8%
	Total	1093	100%

Table 1 shows the total errors in punctuation committed by the students of the eighth semester of the Department of English. Table 1 also shows the frequency and percentage of each type of punctuation error separately. The total numbers of punctuation errors committed by the students of the eighth semester are 1093. The most common type of error was in commas (397), and it makes 36% of the total errors in punctuation. The least common type of error was in a semicolon (79), and it makes up 8% of the total errors in punctuation. The total errors in punctuation based on gender are shown in table 2.

**Table 2:** Classification of Punctuation Errors Based on Gender

No.	Gender	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Males	580	53%
2.	Females	513	47%

	Total	1093	100%
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Table 2 shows the classification of punctuation errors based on gender. Table 2 also shows that the frequency of punctuation errors (580) in males is greater than the frequency of punctuation errors in females (513). The percentage of punctuation errors in males is 57% and in females is 47%.

### *Spelling*

Spelling plays a significant role in writing. It is also an important part of writing. As in our schools, college, and universities students' grades, awards, and achievements are awarded based on writing skills. If students misspell words in writing, they lose marks. In table 3, one can observe the total spelling errors committed by the students of the eighth semester of the Department of English.

**Table 3:** Total Errors in Spelling

No.	Errors Classification	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Capitalization	179	31%
2.	Vowel Substitution	143	25%
3.	Letter Reversals	99	17%
4.	Consonant Omission	80	13%
5.	Vowel Omission	39	7%
6.	Consonant Substitution	34	6%
	Total	574	100%

Table 3 present total errors in spelling committed by the students of the eighth semester of the Department of English. One can also see the frequency and percentage of each type of spelling error separately. The total numbers of spelling errors committed by the student are 574. The most common type of error was in capitalization, and it makes up 31% of the total errors in spelling. The least common type of spelling error was in consonant substitution, and it makes up 6% of the total errors in spelling. The total errors in spelling based on gender are shown in table 4.

**Table 4:** Classification of Spelling Errors Based on Gender

No.	Gender	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Males	306	53%
2.	Females	268	47%
	Total	574	100%

Table 4 presents the classification of spelling errors based on gender. Table 4 exhibits that the frequency of spelling errors (306) in males is more than the frequency of spelling errors in females (268). The percentage of spelling errors in males is 53% and in females is 43%.



### Articles

Articles are three in number: a/an, and the. Articles are of two types: the definite article and indefinite articles. According to Swan (2017), one of the challenging points of English grammar is knowing how to use the articles correctly. Fortunately, most article errors do not matter too much. It is typically possible to understand a sentence even without the articles. However, it is preferable to use the articles correctly. In table 5, one can see the total errors in articles committed by the students of the eighth semester of the Department of English.

**Table 5:** Total Errors in Articles

No.	Errors Classification	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Indefinite Article	92	61%
2.	Definite Article	57	39%
	Total	149	100%

Table 5 presents the total errors in articles committed by the student of the eighth semester of the Department of English. It also shows the frequency and percentage of both types of article errors singly. The total number of articles errors committed by the students of the eighth semester is 149. The frequency of the indefinite article is greater than the definite article. The percentage of the indefinite article is 61% and definite article is 39%. The total errors in articles based on gender are shown in table 6.

**Table 6:** Classification of Article Errors Based on Gender

No.	Gender	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Males	83	56%
2.	Females	66	44%
	Total	149	100%

### Tenses

Swan (2017) defines tense is “a verb form which shows the time of an action or event”. Tenses are of three types: past, present, and future. Each of these types is further categorized in to four forms: indefinite or simple, progressive, perfect, and perfect progressive form. In table 7, one can see the total errors in tenses committed by the students of the eighth semester of the Department of English.

**Table 7:** Total Errors in Tenses

No.	Errors Classification	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Present Indefinite	69	64%
2.	Past Indefinite	38	36%
	Total	107	100%

Table 7 presents the total errors in tenses committed by the student of the eighth semester of the Department of English. It also shows the frequency and percentage of both types of tenses errors singly. The total number of tenses errors committed by the students of the eighth semester is 107. The frequency of the present indefinite is greater than the past indefinite. The percentage of the present indefinite is 64% and past indefinite is 36%. The total errors in tenses based in gender are shown in table 8.

**Table 8:** Classification of Tenses Errors Based on Gender

No.	Gender	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Males	73	68%
2.	Females	34	32%
	Total	107	100%

Table 8 presents the classification of tenses errors based on gender. Table 8 also shows that the frequency of tense errors (73) in males is more than the frequency of tense errors in females (34). The percentage of tense errors in males is 68% and in females is 32%.

### *Preposition*

Preposition is one of parts of speech and it indicates time, space, location and direction. Swan (2017) states that learning how to correctly use preposition in a foreign language is challenging. It is because most English prepositions have a variety of distinct functions. In table 9, one can see the total errors in preposition committed by the students of the eighth semester of the Department of English.

**Table 9:** Total Errors in Preposition

No.	Errors Classification	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Wrong Substitution	29	39%
2.	Preposition Omission	23	31%
3.	Unnecessary Insertion	22	30%
	Total	74	100%

Table 9 shows the total errors in prepositions committed by the students of the eighth semester of the Department of English. One can also see the frequency and percentage of each type of preposition error separately. The total numbers of preposition errors committed by the student are seventy-four. The most common type of error was in the wrong substitution of a preposition, and it makes up 39% of the total errors in the preposition. The least common type of preposition error was in unnecessary insertion of prepositions, and it makes up 30% of the total errors in the preposition. The total errors in preposition based on gender are shown in table 10.

**Table 10:** Classification of Preposition Errors based on Gender

No.	Gender	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Males	41	55%
2.	Females	33	45%
	Total	74	100%

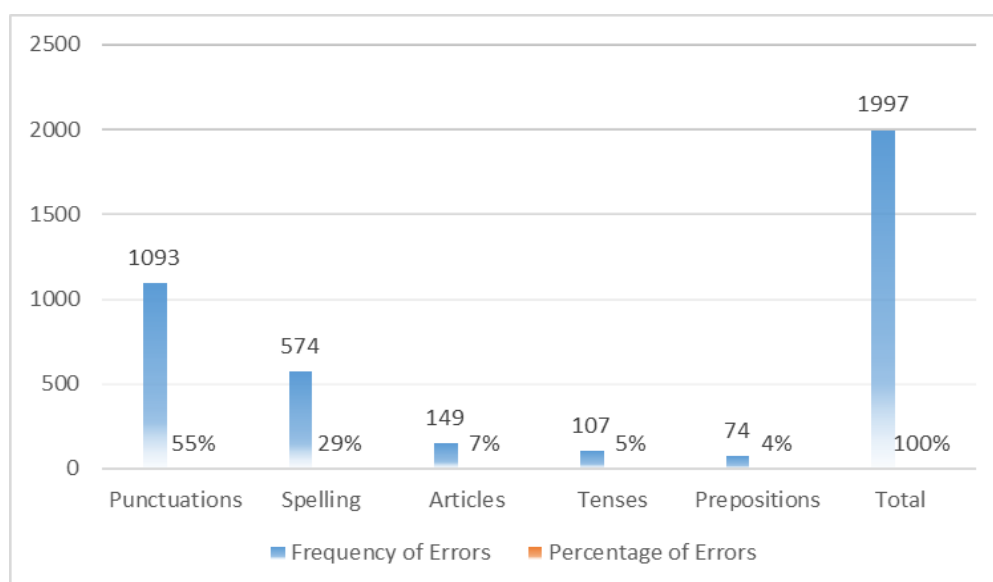
Table 10 presents the classification of preposition errors based on gender. Table 10 also shows that the frequency of preposition errors (41) in males is more than the frequency of preposition errors in females (33). The percentage of preposition errors in males is 55% and in females is 45%.

In last, the total frequency and percentage of errors in the final term papers of the eighth semester is shown in table 11.

**Table 11:** Total frequency and percentage of Errors in the final term papers of the eighth semester students

No.	Errors Classification	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Punctuations	1093	55%
2.	Spelling	574	29%
3.	Articles	149	7%
4.	Tenses	107	5%
5.	Prepositions	74	4%
	Total	1997	100%

Table 11 demonstrates that the total numbers of errors committed by the students of the eighth semester of the Department of English were 1997. One can also see the frequency and percentage of each type of error independently. The highest errors committed by the students of the Department of English in terms of frequency (1093) and percentage (55%) were punctuation errors. The least errors committed by the students of the Department of English in terms of frequency (74) and percentage (4%) were preposition errors. the total frequency and percentage of errors in the final term papers of the eighth semester is shown in graph eleven.



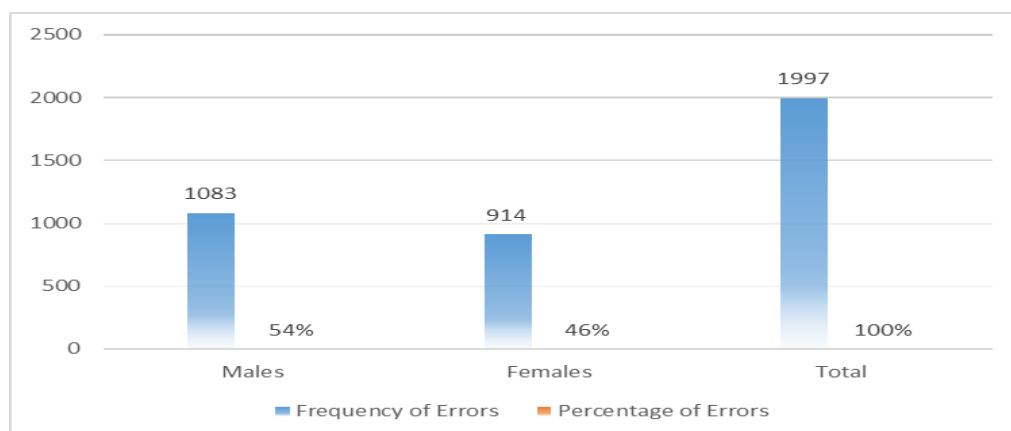
**Figure 1:** Total frequency and percentage of Errors in the final term papers of the eighth semester students

One can observe total frequency and percentage of errors based on gender in table 12.

**Table 12:** Total Frequency and Percentage of Errors Based on Gender

No.	Gender	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Males	1083	54%
2.	Females	914	46%
	Total	1997	100%

Table 12 illustrates that the total frequency and percentage of errors committed by female students of the eighth semester of the Department of English were 914 and 46% respectively. However, the frequency and percentage of the errors of males' students were 1083 and 54% respectively. The total frequency and percentage of errors based on gender is shown in graph twelve.



**Figure 2:** Total Frequency and Percentage of Errors Based on Gender

### FINDINGS

The researcher has drawn the following findings based on of the above discussion:

- Thirty-six percent of the students made errors in the use of a comma.
- A substantial number of students (33%) do not know the proper use of a colon.
- Students (12%) also made mistakes in the use of inverted commas.

- Capitalization is another area where most of the students (31%) make mistakes.
- Letter reversal was another area of concern for most of the students in writing.
- Some students (24%) did not pay attention to vowel substitution in their writing.
- Errors in consonant substitution were fewer as compared to vowel substitution.
- Sixty-one percent of students do not know how to use definite and indefinite articles.
- Sixty-four percent of students have made a glaring mistake in the use of subject verb-agreement in the use of present indefinite tense.
- Most of the students (39%) had made errors in the substitution of a preposition.
- Female students made fewer errors as compared to male students.

### **CONCLUSION**

The objectives of the current study were to identify and examine the English writing errors of the undergraduate students (males and females) of the Department of English. The researcher identified five kinds of errors in the English writing (final term papers) of the undergraduate students (eighth semester) of the Department of English. The students spent four years in the Department of English and their writings illustrate these glaring errors in their writings. These errors include the wrong use of commas, capitalization, indefinite article, present indefinite tense, and substitution of a preposition. It is obvious that the students are weak in the use of mechanics of writing. Moreover, it was also found that the overall performance of female students was exceptionally good, and they made fewer errors in their writings as compared to male students. It is also obvious that the existing curriculum in the Department does not help the students overcome their errors. The teachers should reconsider their teaching methodologies to focus on the writing skills of the students. The administration of the university should also revisit the curriculum where such subjects should be included which helps students focus more on their writing skills.

### **GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the end, the researchers present some recommendations for the students, teachers, and administration of the University.

1. Students study literature and linguistics in the Department. It is expected from them that they would speak and write English correctly. However, the study illustrates that they have not given proper attention to the mechanics of writing. They should read more and identify the areas where they are weak to overcome such weaknesses.
2. Teachers should also reconsider their teaching methodologies because the existing methodologies do not help students to correct their mistakes.

Students should be engaged in writing activities and the checked document should be shared with them so that they may know their weaknesses.

The administration of the University should ask for the feedback of the students frequently for any positive change in the syllabus. The administration should also share the feedback with the teachers for the sake of improvement.

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