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# Evaluating Factors Affecting EFL Learners' Writing at Undergraduate Level: A Survey

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**Abstract-** Writing is an important language skill that benefits a language learner in many ways, from developing vocabulary knowledge to enhancing overall language competence. Unfortunately, EFL learners encounter many difficulties during writing that prevents them from developing their writing skills and eventually negatively affect their overall language learning process. The goal of the present study was to assess the factors that affect EFL learners' writing at the undergraduate level. Using a Likert-scale survey sheet, the study surveyed of 255 undergraduate students at Bangladesh Agricultural University and found that many factors are responsible for EFL learners' poor writing at the undergraduate level. Some factors very intensely affect the learners' writing while some affect moderately, and some have comparatively less effect. By evaluating the factors that affect the learners' writing, the study basically attempted to make the learners aware of those factors they face in writing, so that they can overcome them, improve their writing skills, and become proficient writers.

**Keywords:** *EFL learners; undergraduate level; writing difficulties; writing skills.*

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# Evaluating Factors Affecting EFL Learners' Writing at Undergraduate Level: A Survey

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**Abstract** Writing is an important language skill that benefits a language learner in many ways, from developing vocabulary knowledge to enhancing overall language competence. Unfortunately, EFL learners encounter many difficulties during writing that prevents them from developing their writing skills and eventually negatively affect their overall language learning process. The goal of the present study was to assess the factors that affect EFL learners' writing at the undergraduate level. Using a Likert-scale survey sheet, the study surveyed of 255 undergraduate students at Bangladesh Agricultural University and found that many factors are responsible for EFL learners' poor writing at the undergraduate level. Some factors very intensely affect the learners' writing while some affect moderately, and some have comparatively less effect. By evaluating the factors that affect the learners' writing, the study basically attempted to make the learners aware of those factors they face in writing, so that they can overcome them, improve their writing skills, and become proficient writers.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Learning to write and improving one's foreign language skills are highly correlated. There are a lot of benefits of writing in learning a foreign language. For example, writing in the target language helps learners' generate new vocabulary and develop vocabulary knowledge. We all know that the most practical way to learn and remember a new word is to encounter and use it in different contexts. Writing provides learners with opportunities to use a particular word in different contexts. Writing also offers learners different occasions to use various types of language patterns and structures. Through repeated use of different vocabulary, sentence structures, and language patterns, writing helps learners find out the most effective language for communication. According to Bello (1997), writing is a continuing process of discovering how to find the most effective language for communicating one's thoughts and feelings. He also mentioned that writing enhances language acquisition as learners experiment with words, sentences, and larger chunks of writing to communicate their ideas effectively and reinforce the grammar and vocabulary they are learning in class. Writing is, in fact, the most available, reliable, and engaging way of language use that enhances learners' overall language competence

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and makes them more efficient language users. Moreover, Writing provides learners with physical evidence of their achievements, consolidates their grasp of vocabulary and structure, and complements the other language skills (Englishmate, 2018). Finally, writing develops learners' essential literacy skills, boosts their motivation and confidence level, and helps them grow a more positive attitude towards language learning.

However, while writing in English, EFL learners typically encounter a lot of difficulties that hinder develop their writing skills and eventually negatively affect their language learning process. Here it is certainly important to understand the difficulties that the learners face in writing to help them develop their writing skills as well as improve their overall language competence. The achieved findings will also contribute to the more effective teaching and learning of writing skills in the language classroom.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing is a medium of human communication that represents language and emotion with signs and symbols (Wikipedia, 2019). Coulmas (1999) defined it as 'a set of visible or tactile signs used to represent units of language in a systematic way, with the purpose of recording messages which can be retrieved by everyone who knows the language in question and the rules by virtue of which its units are encoded in the writing system.' Within a language system, writing relies on many of the same structures as speech, such as vocabulary, grammar, and semantics, with the added dependency of a system of signs or symbols (Wikipedia, 2019). According to Bauer (2007), as in Gayo & Widodo (2018), to write good English, several aspects of the language must be taken into consideration, namely its morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatism.

Writing is a very complex and challenging task. There are a lot of factors that markedly create obstructions in the writing process. Lack of sufficient grammar knowledge, for example, is one of the most important factors that hampers the writing process significantly. As mentioned in Gayo & Widodo (2018), many EFL learners encounter writing difficulties, and one of the major ones is linked to English grammar (Belkhir & Benyelles, 2017). Writing requires a good knowledge of grammar and word choice (Kamlasi & Nokas, 2017). The rules of grammar help govern the way writing takes place and ensure that it can be easily understood by the

readers (Muhsin, 2015). Researchers found a significant correlation between learners' grammar knowledge and their writing skill. Unfortunately, most of the EFL learners lack sufficient grammar knowledge, and consequently, show poor performance in writing. Many researchers (Kamlasi & Nokas, 2017; Gustilo & Magno, 2012; Abushihab, 2014; Sawalmeh, 2013; Limengka & Kuntjara, 2013; Lasaten, 2014; Ngangbam, 2016; Darus & Ching, 2009; Singh et al., 2017; Sermsook et al., 2017; Hamdi, 2005; Dweikat & Aqel, 2017; Mustafa, 2017; Zheng & Park, 2013; Khanom, 2014; etc.) studied the types and frequency of grammatical errors that EFL learners make in their writings and showed that poor grammar knowledge and grammatical errors significantly hamper the learners' writing ability.

Successful writing requires rapid and effortless access to and knowledge of individual word meanings. According to David Wilkins (1972), "..... while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." Indeed, vocabulary plays a significant role in the production of language, whether it is spoken or written. Viera (2017) studied the importance of vocabulary knowledge in the production of written texts and found that the vocabulary knowledge of a foreign language is necessary as it provides learners a broader ability to produce well-structured written texts. Several other studies (Yuksel, 2015; Karakoc & Kose, 2017; Hastuti, 2015; Dehkordi & Salehi, 2016; Olinghouse & Wilson, 2012; Maskor & Baharudin, 2016; Roche & Harrington, 2013; etc.) also reported consistently high correlations between the learners' vocabulary knowledge and their writing ability and showed that the lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge considerably creates obstacles in the writing process. Besides vocabulary knowledge, however, a successful piece of writing relies upon choosing appropriate words and using them correctly (Ingold, 2017). Many EFL learners fail to choose and use appropriate words in their writings and thus fail to create any good and lasting impact on their readers.

The other most noticeable factors that affect learners' writing skills are spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Various studies (e.g., Albalawi, 2016; Al-Oudat, 2017; Subhi & Yasin, 2015; Liu, 2015; Bestgen & Granger, 2011; Benyo, 2014; Kotsyuk, 2015; etc.) investigated the writing performance and spelling errors of the EFL learners and found a high percentage of spelling errors in students' writing that adversely affected their writing performance. On the other hand, several studies (e.g., Salamin et al., 2016; Salman et al., 2017; Awad, 2012; Samhon & Abdall, 2016; Catabay, 2016; Alfonso, 2016; Wilcox et al., 2013; Alfaki, 2015; Kotsyuk, 2015; etc.) examined the capitalization and punctuation errors in EFL learners' writing and found a deep correlation between the students' knowledge about capitalization and punctuation and their writing performance.

Apart from the factors mentioned above, the other most evident factors that affect EFL learners' writing performance as studied by various researchers are content (Alinsunod, 2014; Nik et al., 2010; Pablo & Lasaten, 2018), lack of ideas (Fareed et al., 2016; Huy, 2015; Pablo & Lasaten, 2018), organization of ideas (Alinsunod, 2014; Nik et al., 2010; Pablo & Lasaten, 2018; Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017), cohesion and coherence (Jichun, 2015; Saputra et al., 2014; Al-Badi, 2015; Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017), reader (Alinsunod, 2014), inter-lingual interference (Phuket & Othman, 2015; Sermsook et al., 2017; Jichun, 2015; Saputra et al., 2014, Akbar et al., 2018), writing anxiety (Fareed et al., 2016; Al-Badi, 2015), lack of writing practice (Fareed et al., 2016), low motivation (Fareed et al., 2016; Huy, 2015), etc.

### III. RESEARCH PURPOSE

Like many countries in the world, Bangladesh is a country where the learners start learning English since they start their academic life. Before taking admission in universities, they usually complete 12 years of formal education in schools and colleges, and every year they are taught English mandatorily. The learners are specially taught English writing skills. They are even assessed exclusively by their writing skills. However, despite the long and continuous formal education, a large number of EFL learners are found at the undergraduate level facing a lot of difficulties during writing in English that markedly hinder develop their writing skills and consequently negatively affect their language learning process. The purpose of the present study is to identify and assess the factors that affect EFL learners' writing at the undergraduate level. The study also tends to make the learners aware of those factors they face in writing, so that they can overcome them and develop their writing skills.

### IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### a) *Participants*

The participants of the present study were the undergraduate level EFL students belonging to different faculties (Faculty of Veterinary Science, Faculty of Agricultural Economics & Rural Sociology, and Faculty of Fisheries) of Bangladesh Agricultural University. A total of 255 students participated in the survey. They were basically selected through the purposive sampling method based on convenience and availability.

#### b) *Data Collection*

The data for the present study were collected using a Likert-scale survey sheet (Appendix-1). The survey sheet was distributed to the students in their reading classes, and the students were only required to put tick marks on appropriate options. The students expressed their views through the survey sheet, and the

researcher, in return, obtained a clear picture of the factors that affect their writing performance.

### c) Data Presentation

Table 1

	Factors that affect writing	Always	Very Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1.	Grammar	18 (7.06%)	49 (19.22%)	145 (56.86%)	39 (15.29%)	4 (1.57%)
2.	Vocabulary	67 (26.27%)	106 (41.57%)	73 (28.63%)	9 (3.53%)	0 (0%)
3.	Word choice	21 (8.24%)	77 (30.20%)	123 (48.24%)	33 (12.94%)	1 (0.39%)
4.	Spelling	24 (9.41%)	41 (16.08%)	125 (49.02%)	60 (23.53%)	5 (1.96%)
5.	Punctuation & capitalization	16 (6.27%)	45 (17.65%)	87 (34.12%)	84 (32.94%)	23 (9.02%)
6.	Content	26 (10.20%)	74 (29.02%)	107 (41.96%)	40 (15.69%)	8 (3.14%)
7.	Generation of ideas	25 (9.80%)	75 (29.41%)	110 (43.14%)	43 (16.86%)	2 (0.78%)
8.	Organization of ideas	25 (9.80%)	72 (28.24%)	110 (43.14%)	46 (18.04%)	2 (0.78%)
9.	Cohesion & coherence	16 (6.27%)	52 (20.39%)	114 (44.71%)	57 (22.35%)	16 (6.27%)
10.	Reader	30 (11.76%)	62 (24.31%)	83 (32.55%)	59 (23.14%)	21 (8.24%)
11.	Mother tongue influence	32 (12.55%)	54 (21.18%)	78 (30.59%)	61 (23.92%)	30 (11.76%)
12.	Lack of practice	71 (27.84%)	83 (32.55%)	78 (30.59%)	18 (7.06%)	5 (1.96%)
13.	Lack of confidence	51 (20%)	54 (21.18%)	92 (36.08%)	41 (16.08%)	17 (6.67%)
14.	Writing anxiety	29 (11.37%)	54 (21.18%)	88 (34.51%)	46 (18.04%)	38 (14.90%)
15.	Mention any other factor:	—	—	—	—	—

### d) Data Analysis

According to the survey results, poor vocabulary knowledge is one of the most prominent and very significant factors that affects EFL learners' writing. 26.27% of the participants always and 41.57% of the participants very often face vocabulary problem in their writings, while 28.63% of the participants' writing performance is sometimes affected by poor vocabulary knowledge. Out of 255 participants, although there are only 9 (3.53%) participants who rarely face this problem, no participant is found whose writing is never affected by poor vocabulary knowledge. That means everybody faces this problem.

Lack of practice is another very significant factor that affects EFL learners' writing performance. 27.84% of the participants believe that since they do not practice, so they always face problems in their writings. Although this causes no problem at all for only 1.96% of the participants, and only 7.06% rarely face this problem; a significant percentage of the participants very often (32.55%) and sometimes (30.59%) encounter this problem in their writings.

According to the study, the factors that moderately affect ELF learners' writing performance are insufficient grammar knowledge, appropriate word choice, spelling, content, generation, and organization of ideas, cohesion and coherence, and lack of confidence. We see, for these factors, the majority of the participants have marked that they sometimes encounter those difficulties in their writings although a considerable percentage of the participants are found facing the problems very often. However, these factors are not as prominent as vocabulary and lack of practice.

Finally, the study has revealed that punctuation and capitalization, prospective reader, mother tongue influence, and writing anxiety are the factors that have comparatively less effect on the learners' writing performance. For these factors, we see, a considerable percentage of the participants are found who never or very rarely face these problems in their writings.

## V. CONCLUSION

Writing is a complex activity in which the writer draws on a range of knowledge and skills, and this

complexity makes it unlikely that the same individual will perform equally well on different occasions and tasks (Hyland, 2003 as in Kamlasi & Nokas, 2017). It is, indeed, a very difficult and challenging activity. Being an English teacher at a university, I find every year a lot of students having a lot of problems in writing. Here the problems that the learners face in writing hamper their writing process, hinder develop their written communication skills, and ultimately make them worried and frustrated in the language learning process. After reviewing related literature, I pointed out several impediments that hamper the EFL learners' writing performance and then surveyed to evaluate the influence of those obstacles. I tried to make the learners aware of those factors they face in writing so that they can overcome them, improve their writing skills, and become proficient writers. I believe that the implications of the findings of the present study will contribute to the more effective teaching and learning of writing skills in the language classroom.

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## APPENDIX-1

	Factors that affect writing	Always	Very Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1.	Grammar					
2.	Vocabulary					
3.	Word choice					
4.	Spelling					
5.	Punctuation & capitalization					
6.	Content					
7.	Generation of ideas					
8.	Organization of ideas					
9.	Cohesion & coherence					
10.	Reader					
11.	Mother tongue influence					
12.	Lack of practice					
13.	Lack of confidence					
14.	Writing anxiety					
15.	Mention any other factor:					

