Analyzing Errors in Application: A Study of EFL intermediate Students in Pakistan

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Abstract

The present study is aimed at exploring errors in the format of application among 40 Pakistani EFL (male) learners who are enrolled in the Science group intermediate part two at Government Science College Quetta. Errors in the format of application are analyzed keeping in view the prevailing conventional format of blocked application. The researcher selected the desired population through simple random sampling with the intention to find generalizable results. However, to analyze the data, a sequential mixed method research was employed in which quantitative phase was followed by qualitative phase. The findings of the study suggested that participants' knowledge regarding the format of application in English was far from satisfactory because almost all parts of their applications reflected rather basic errors. On the bases of these findings, this paper suggests college teachers to equip their students with the knowledge of how to write a well-designed application. Hence, the findings of the present study are likely to educate the learners of any level regarding the format of an application.

Key words: Inside address, Salutation, Body style, Complimentary closer and Signature.

Introduction

This study aims to examine the proficiency levels of undergraduate students in part of Pakistan. The focus of the study is on learners' composition power in writing letters. The study is deemed critical within the context of Pakistan because English functions as the most powerful language not only within Pakistan, but it also holds phenomenally crucial role worldwide. English is acknowledged as one of the best sources of correspondence in the

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modern era. It has acquired a more prominent number of speakers in the non-native world and turned out to be one of the profoundly vital languages. For instance, Crystal (2012) referred to the global surge of the English language as "There has never been a language so widely spread or spoken by so many people as English" (p. 139). In the same way, Graddol (1997) stated, "English increasingly acts as a lingua franca between non-native speakers" (p. 13). Similarly within the context of Pakistan, English enjoys considerably important position vis-à-vis all other languages. In view of its powerful status in Pakistan, Rahman (2005) termed it as a "Passport to privileges". In Pakistan, English functions as the official language. Likewise, English occupies a pivotal position in the education sector as it features in the schools, colleges, and at the higher education levels. According to Ahmad, Ahmed, Bukhari, and Bukhari (2011), "Due to its importance as international language, English has got a privileged position as a second compulsory language in Pakistan. English is taught as a compulsory subject at different levels mostly from class I to B.A/B.Sc." (p. 19). Therefore, Pakistani EFL College students may be expected to hold relatively better proficiency and higher level of competence in different forms of English, be oral or written.

Among various other genres, letter of application can play a vital role in students' academic career at any level. Letter of application and other letters can be important communication tools at any professional setting. Therefore, given the crucial role letters play in a professional's career, students of EFL can be expected to demonstrate proper organization and observance of conventional and approved style for the sack of positive impact. It may demonstrate a standard and appropriate language. According to Azizi (2012) "The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill. It is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments" (p.114).

Observation suggests that undergraduate students at the college level in Pakistan fail to demonstrate sufficient knowledge about the setup of application and, and thus they often violate the basic conventions which may carry negative impressions upon the readers. Their knowledge regarding the format of application is quite limited or else under the effects of their native languages because they commit errors in writing a simple application. Native languages are often seen as influencing their writing in the English language as observed among EFL learners worldwide. Moreover, in many cases the written applications of college learners reflect deviation from the basic conventions. They fail to arrange the different parts of application which reveal their lack of knowledge in English language. On the other hand, the erroneous application may leave negative impressions both upon the concerned chair and

the examiner because application is part of their papers at college level examination. It is, thus, in an application's personal interests to compose an error-free letter of application (Brusaw, Alred & Oliu, 1987).

This study is an attempt to explore the problems faced by EFL college learners in composing applications. Moreover, it highlights the various parts of application and provides some useful input as to how best EFL students may compose an application. Practically, the study is likely to educate EFL learners with some fundamental aspects of the format of application on one hand; and on the other hand, it will put forward some workable suggestions regarding the aforesaid problem. In a broad sense, the present work will draw the attention of the syllabus designers to specify a considerable space for the art of application writing in the prescribed syllabus for schools and colleges.

Literature Review

Conventional format of a blocked application

Conventionally a blocked application consists of the following part:

Inside address

Inside address, the first part of application, comprises the designation of the addressee whom the application is forwarded to. Hence, the prime aim of the application is to arrest the attention of the addressee (Brusaw et al., 1987).

It starts from left hand margin and should be in three segments. The first and second segments, containing the addressee's designation and the name of the institution alternatively, end with comma while the third segment ends with a full stop.

E.g.   *The Principal,*

Government Science College,

Quetta.

Salutation

Salutation or greeting opening is the second part of a blocked application which addresses the receiver (Nickerson, 1999). It starts at left hand margin and ends with a comma. However, its wording may vary according to the nature of relation and the status of the addressee.

a) *Application to a male addressee may start with salutation:*
Respected Sir,

b) *Application to the addressee, whose gender you do not know, may start:*
 Respected Sir or Madam,

c) *In case of a female addressee, a salutation may be:*
Respected Madam,

Body style

Body of an application contains writer's personal details and the issue being discussed. It has a room for arguments to convince the addressee and should be in a smooth and attractive language so that it may carry positive impressions. The body of an application should be in three or four paragraphs;

a) The opening paragraph must be in attractive and convincing style of language.

b) The second paragraph in the body of application often contains individual information such as qualification and experience etc.

c) The ending paragraph contains the purpose or request which the application is forwarded for.

Complementary Close

A complementary close is placed below the ending remarks of the body on the right hand margin and ends with a comma. The close is used to signal the complication of the letter (Nickerson, 1999). Akin to salutation, its tone may be formal and polite.

E.g. *Yours obediently, yours faithfully, yours sincerely or yours truly.*

Signature

Signature is positioned below the complementary close. It contains the writer's name, signature and status and used to identify the sender (Nickerson, 1999). In case the application is forwarded by an employ, it may contain his/her designation.

Date

Date is put on the left hand margin at equal position to the signature. It may be formatted in different ways defending on applicant's choice.

E.g. *a) Date: August 14, 1947.*

b) Date: 14th of August, 1947.

c) Date: 14/08/1947.

Literature on writing problems have accumulated over the last few decades. The area gets more value when explored in the context of non-native learners' writing difficulties because writing is complex art which can't be acquired easily. "Writing is a highly complex task and writing in second language makes the task further complicated as it requires sufficient command over the second language to fulfill all the formalities" (Sarfraz, 2011, p. 30). It becomes even more difficult when practiced in EFL context where learners often remain thoughtful in finding solution to a series of writing problems (Hyland, 2008). Successful writing needs cognitive abilities and linguistic competence for the purpose of effective communication whereas in majority of cases the performance of EFL learners is far from satisfactory in composing academic writing (Mo, 2012). In fact, academic writing needs sensible efforts and enough practice in organization, language use and writing mechanics (Younes & Albalawi, 2015). While writing an application, the applicant must care for the conventional style and meet all formalities because application is the tool through which one can express one's ideas in black and white. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary an application is, "A formal (often written) request for something, such as a job, permission to do something or at a college or university" (p. 48). It must observe a formal style and meet all formalities regarding its format.

Van Nus (1999) in classifying the parts of business letter calls them as: letterhead, inside address, reference, date, salutation, subject line, pre-close, close, signature and postscript. These parts indicate that there must be specific rules for composing business letter. Similarly, writing application requires some conventions which distinguishes it from ordinary language because it links the applicant to the concerned office. According to Foz-Gil and González-Pueyo (2009), "Even those who have good command on grammar and lexicon fail to communicate appropriately and effectively in particular social interactions, because they do not master the unwritten specific rules of these communicative events in English and this may affect their business relationships" (p. 44). One thing which must be remembered by every correspondent is that a letter is not only a piece of information but a piece of one's personality (Asghar, 1970). However, Shah (2003) states, "An application should set forth your age, your academic qualification and other matters that show your fitness for the particular job advertised" (p. 733). In fact, our college learners, who need to correspond through application, fail to meet the formalities of writing application in English because they don't have the required linguistic knowledge in English language. According to Kavaliauskienė (2009) "Transfer of errors may occur because the learners lack

the necessary information in the second language or the attentional capacity to activate the appropriate second language routine" (p. 4). These students face troubles in formal communication both, within the institute and outside the institution in their routine lives because college students are expected to be good in written communication, especially in English. Adas and Bakir (2013) state, "English also plays an important role in education and students are expected to use it effectively" (p.254). Non-native English learners, beside other errors in the format of application, fail to punctuate the different parts of application. They deal with punctuations according to their native language. Adas and Bakir (2013) affirm, "Several ELLs with Arabic background struggle with punctuation since Arabic has few limitations in the use of commas and periods than English. The semi-colon, and the exclamation marks aren't very commonly used in students' writings" (p. 255). Similarly Pakistani college students face troubles in the proper use of punctuation marks in drafting an application. They are not given a proper treatment regarding the structure and lay out of a blocked application.

Full block application starts at the left margin excluding the complementary closer, dateline and company signature, containing the name of the writer, are placed at the right margin (Miryanti, 2012). The present study focuses blocked style of application because the prevailing system in our country considers it as an approved format and that Pakistani teaching community teach blocked style of application for no specific reasons.

Research Methodology

The present study intended to explore errors in the formats of students written applications in English language by using sequential mixed method research in which quantitative phase was followed by qualitative phase. Mixed method research involves the combinations of qualitative and quantitative research (Dornyei, 2007). Hence, the use of mixed method research design compensates the drawbacks of both Quantitative and Qualitative research designs and yields generalizable results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In quantitative phase the respondents were asked to write an application to the principal for fee concession while in qualitative phase, ten students were randomly selected for a semi-structured interview which comprised five question regarding learners' knowledge about application, its format and learners' past experience in learning the aforesaid genre because semi-structured interview is the compromise between structured and unstructured interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The scheme comprised the collection of the desired data, participants' applications, which were filtered through simple random sampling and then observation and evaluation of the

errors committed by respondents while at the same time considering participants self-reported problems in composing error-free application.

Participants

The present study was conducted among 431 undergraduate (male) students enrolled in F.Sc second year at Govt. Science College, located in Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan, Pakistan. The respondents had English as compulsory subject from class sixth to the intermediate level and had been given enough feedback down the career. Data were collected after a written permission was granted by the Principal of the aforementioned College. However, the applications of only 40 respondents were selected for analysis through simple random sampling with the intention to find more generalizable results. The researcher collected the data himself so that it might be ensured that the learners worked all to themselves and under the same environment within specific time limit.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed in two phases as qualitative and quantitative respectively. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics while computing frequency counts and percentages at descriptive analysis level. Students' applications were checked completely centering their aforesaid parts.

On the other hand, qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis which Braun and Clarke (2006) defined as a process of identifying, analyzing and reporting themes within the data. Thematic analysis can be employed to transform qualitative data into quantitative form, and subject them statistical analysis Boyatzis (1998). Hence, the responses as attained through semi-structured interviews were thematically categorized which according to (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998) is a main procedure in Mixed Methods data analysis.

Findings

The findings of the study revealed that participants had rather limited awareness about the organization of application in English. Table 01, given below, presents statistical analysis of the errors respondents committed in composing different parts and aspects of letter.

Table 01: *Statistical analysis of errors*

Types of Errors	Inside Address	Salutation	Body style	Complem entary close	Signa ture	Date

Spelling Error	21.09%	30%	44.20%	44.11%	00%	3.44%
Punctuation Error	46.09%	70%	31.8%	44.11%	00%	44.8%
Format Error	32.8%	00%	23.91%	10.2%	00%	51.72%
Total Errors	33.42%	5.22%	36.03%	17.75%	00%	7.57%

Based on table 01, it can be seen that different parts of 40 application reflected 383 errors in all. Out of these errors, 128 (33.42%) errors were found in the inside address in which 21.09% errors were found in the spellings as number of participants had spelt the term principal as *'principle'* and college as *'callage'* which results negative impression upon the addressee. The data reveals that 46.09% of these errors occurred in punctuation in the inside address.

Script from Participants' Application
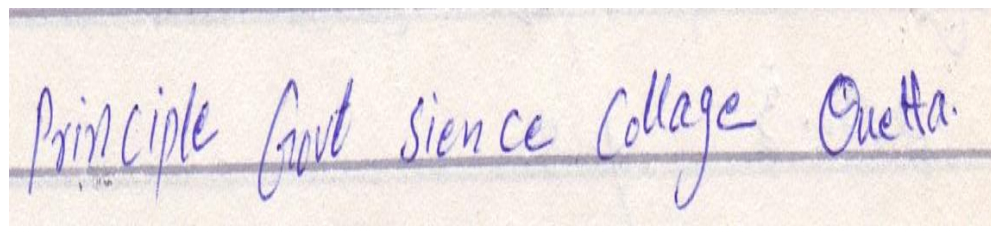
The participants had either omitted the punctuation marks or else used full stop instead comma which reveals the lack of their knowledge regarding the writing mechanics of English language. As the above table reflects, the format of the inside address reflected 32.81% errors as number of participants had written the entire inside address in a single line. However, 0.51% participants had completely omitted the inside address.

Salutation was the part which reflected 20 (5.22%) errors. Among these errors 30% errors were seen in the spellings while 70% errors were seen in the improper use of punctuation marks. Whereas, the format of salutation mirrored

on error. Additionally, 10% of the participants had completely omitted the salutation.

Body style of the applications was the erroneous part which reflected 138 (36.03%) errors in which 44.20% errors were observed in the spellings while 31.88% errors were seen in use of punctuation marks. Moreover, the format of the body reflected 23.91% errors.

Similarly, complementary close reflected 68 (17.75%) errors among them 44.11% errors were seen in spellings and 44.11% errors were found in punctuating the complementary close. The format of complementary close reflected 10.29% while 2.25% of the participants had omitted the complementary close. Signature was the only part which reflected no error. Nevertheless, 12.5% participants had omitted the signature.

Date was the part which reflected 29 (7.57%) errors in which 3.44% errors were seen in the spellings while 44.82% errors were seen in the use of punctuation marks. It was the format of the date that reflected 51.72% errors as 40% of the participants had omitted the date.
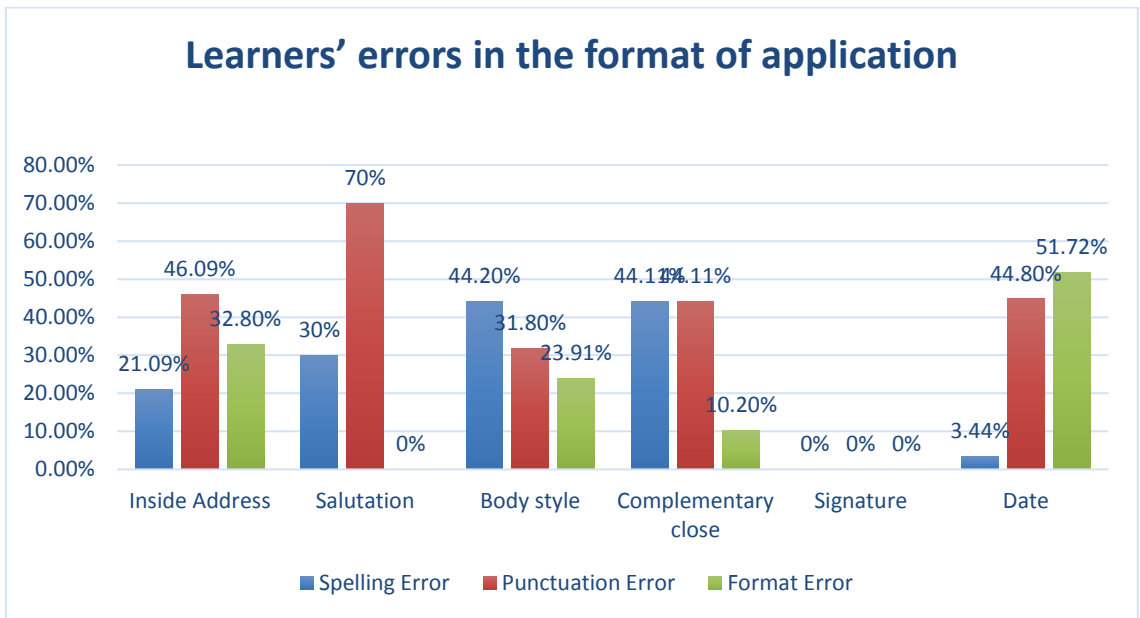

Figure 01: Learners' errors in the format of application

Learners' self-reported problems in the format of application

In this phase students' self-reported problems in the format of application are analyzed while developing themes and their sub-themes in order to reach a proper conclusion. Hence, the data as obtained through semi-

structured interview were transcribed which yielded the following themes and their sub-themes.

Table 02: Learners' self-reported problems in the format of application

S/No	Themes	Sub-themes
1	The Format of Application	a) The lack of information about the format of application
2	Corrective Feedback	a) Teachers do not give feedback b) Teachers have not pointed out our errors
3	Punctuation Marks	a) The lack of information about punctuation marks
4	The lack of Practice	b) Difficulties in using punctuation marks correctly Learners are not made practice to write application

Table 02 reflects that the format of application emerged as the most prominent theme with its two sub-themes as majority of the respondents reported that they had problems in composing applications according to the set standard. Learners reported that they lacked information about the format of application and that the implemented course had no specimen of application.

Examples from participants' interviews.

Std. 3: I don't have information about the format of application.

Std. 1: There is no sample of application in our book.

The table further reflects that corrective feedback was reported as the second leading theme with two sub-themes as learners reported that teachers neither gave them feedback nor did they point out learners' errors.

Example from participant' interview.

Std. 9: Teachers don't check our applications

Problems concerning punctuation marks emerged as another theme with two sub-themes ie; The lack of information about punctuation marks and difficulties in using punctuation marks correctly as learners admitted that they lacked information about the usage of punctuation marks, which they said, was a difficult task to be acquired.

Example from participant' interview.

Std. 5: *Sir, it is difficult for me to use punctuation marks properly.*

The lack of practice was reported as another theme as the opted respondents reported that they were not provided the chances to practice the art of application in their previous academic career.

Discussion

The present study revealed that participants' written applications reflected all types of errors in their different parts. However, the highest frequency of these errors was seen in body style which comprised 138 (36.03%) errors in which 44.20% errors were observed in spellings, the ever troublesome issue among non-native English learners. Participants had committed many errors in spelling common words as some of them had misspelled the word fee as **'pice'** and the word college as **'callege'.** It shows the effects of their National language Urdu in which phoneme /e/ in the term college is written and spoken as /a/ and the word for fee is **'pice'**.

Script from Participant's Application
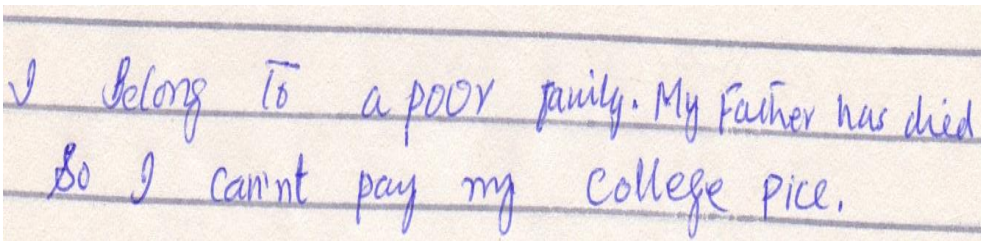
On the one hand, they cannot spell the words that are repeatedly used in daily life, it is observed that participants fail to distinguish between homophones which effects their power of communication on the other hand. In such cases the theme of the sentence may not remain convincing. For instance, the sentence, **'Our principle granted me a full pice concession'** may not convey to the readers the same theme expressed by a sentence 'Our principal granted me a full fee concession'. As Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, and Gaudel (2015) stated, "Bad spelling affects English sentence structure and causes the mispronunciation of words" (p. 185). Learners' weakness in spelling may be the consequence of three elements. Firstly, their level of competence is less enough to overcome the aforesaid issue. Secondly, they pay no proper attention to master the art of spelling. Lastly, the implemented teaching system seems to have no space for preparing learners for getting rid of spelling errors.

It was observed that the opted population had some troubles in the usage of punctuation marks because 31.88% errors were seen in punctuating

the applications. A point worth mentioning is that some of the learners had used full stop after every word which resulted ambiguity in understanding the theme of the sentences. The use of comma, semi-colon, colon and other punctuation marks may upset these participants because their knowledge regarding the use of punctuation seems to be far from satisfactory. The improper use of punctuation marks results confusion and may obscure the structural meaning of the sentence. It seems as if learners have not been made practice or else the instructors don't bother to point out learners' errors in punctuating applications. In many cases the concerned authorities process the applications without pointing out learners errors. Besides, the selected population failed to escape L1 influences because their native language Urdu is comparatively less dependent on punctuation marks in case of meaning.

In the same way, learners' applications reflected 23.91% errors in the format of the body. It was observed that a number of participants had composed the entire application in a single paragraph which shows that majority of them had no concept of how to organize the body of application. They deviated from the basic conventions of organization and management of body style of application which not only decline the standard of their applications but it may also threaten learners' face and academic result. In such cases the application may not appeal to the concerned chair and it may carry negative impressions. It will, additionally, unveil learners' poor competence in communication that despite their level of education they fail to compose the body of letters in an established and organized manner. It may be the result of a tendency among EFL learners who avoid communicating in English language.

Inside address was the second most erroneous part in learners' application. It reflected 128 (33.42%) errors in which 21.09% errors were found in the spellings as number of participants had spelt the term principal as principle and college as *callege*. It reveals the weaknesses of participants in differentiating between homophones and may irritate the addressee and examiner because it is the very opening part of an application. In fact, the opening of the application should be attractive and error-free for the sack of positive impressions otherwise it may carry negative results. The case in the present study was quite woeful because participants' works were less satisfactory. They had either omitted the punctuation marks or else used full stop instead comma which may cause a change to the structure and meaning of the sentence. The format of the inside address mirrored 32.81% errors as many participants had written the entire inside address in a single line, following the conventional style in writing an application in Urdu. It shows mother tongue influences which is quite common among EFL learners. 0.51% participants had completely omitted inside address which may be the consequence of

learners' carelessness or else the lack of positive feedback by their teachers. In general, the application without inside address would reveal learners' ill competency both to the addressee and examiner.

Complementary close was the third most erroneous part of the application which reflected 68 (17.75%) errors. Out of these, 44.11% errors were seen in spellings because many participants had spelled the word yours as ***your's***. Napitupulu (2017) suggest that a letter should end with either "Regards, Yours Truly, or Yours Sincerely".

Script from Participant's Application
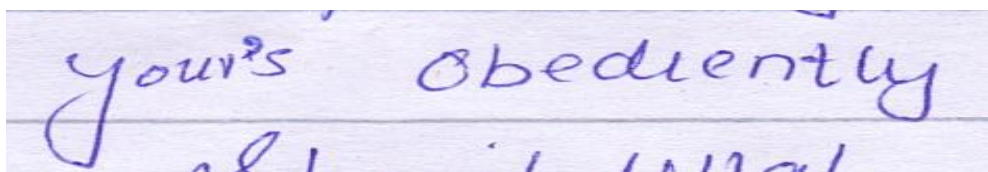
A standard application may have a proper ending and should not report any error or ambiguity least it should irritate the reader because in number of cases the authorities point out errors in application. Teaching staff at schools and collages should focus such errors and they should design a proper mechanism for letting their students get rid of such errors.

The next erroneous part of learners' applications was date was which reflected 29 (7.57%) errors in which 3.44% errors were seen in spellings while 44.82% errors were seen in the use of punctuation marks as some of the participants had used no punctuation at all. In fact, many participants had put the date beneath the signature while 40% of the participants had omitted the date. It may be so that they have never received positive feedback from their teachers which would have reduced many issues. The lack of corrective feedback should not be considered as weakness on the part of EFL teachers only rather learners' lack of interest to master the art of composing a well-organized application may also add to the issue. Pudin, Storey, Len, Swanto, and Din (2015) observe that, "Feedback on errors given to students empowers them and enables them to make strides towards achieving the desired language goals" (p. 55).

Any error in salutation may not carry any positive impression because it is a direct address to the addressee and it should be cared well. In fact, such errors are directly linked with students' competence and a positive feedback given to them. However, the lack of practice on the part of learners may add to

the issue which is vivid in analyzing the signature which was the only part that reflected no error probably because it consists of applicants' name and class in which they study.

Basically, the prevailing system of teaching in Pakistani EFL classes seems not have any focus on the format of application. The untrained teachers may not have the desired aptitude to guide the learners who often try to avoid corresponding in English. They are not made write application and, thus, it becomes a very rare for EFL learners to inscribe applications in English. They either take the organization of application quite easy or else don't bother to consult the teachers which results errors in the format of application.

Conclusion

The findings of this research revealed that the opted learners had insufficient information about the format of application and that their written applications reflected number of errors. Their works were much lower than the expected standard of intermediate level learners. Nevertheless, these problems are socio-cultural in nature and that they can be overcome by letting learners be exposed to the norms of certain genres.

It was observed that most of the errors were caused by the lack of sufficient practice among learners and positive feedback by the instructors. Learners' errors are not pointed out as a result they fail to realize their short comings because error analysis not only highlights the errors but also makes learners shun them forever. The present study also unveiled the fact that the process of Inter-language has not only influenced the linguistic proficiency of the learners but also stunned their power of composing a well-organized application.

A point worth mentioning is that the participants failed to escape the mother tongue influences as number of cases reflected a direct translation from Urdu. The study also found syntactic-morphological carelessness of the learners which resulted errors in the proper use of both functional and lexical morphemes. Students' work mirrored the repetition of errors in using punctuation marks which indicate their weaknesses in English language. On the basis of these findings, this study suggests the following solutions:

- The prescribed syllabus for secondary schools and colleges should contain chapters related to academic writing.
- The basic rules for the format of applications be taught by teachers down the schooling days and development in academic writing skill should be focused at all levels.

- College teachers should make their students practice the art of writing application so that they may master this art and teachers should give them positive feedback.
- Students should be encouraged to go through books related to academic writing.

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