



Research Article

## A Study of the Errors in the Use of Capitalisation Among Junior Secondary School Pupils in Bo District

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### Abstract

Writing constitutes one of the main skills that second language learners find difficulty in. One area they find difficult in the process of writing compositions is the correct use of capital letters.

This study is an attempt to describe the common errors that pupils commit in the use of capitalisation in written texts. Since the use of capital letters constitutes an important area in the overall assessment of pupils' written texts, this study provided necessary information to guide teachers of Language Arts in preparing pupils for writing tasks. The main objective therefore was to categorise and determine the extent to which errors are committed by Junior Secondary School pupils.

In order to obtain data for this study, three Junior Secondary Schools were selected in the Bo Municipality. Fifty pupils were randomly selected from each of the three schools, comprising twenty-five from JSS 2 and twenty-five from JSS 3. This gave a total of one hundred and fifty pupils in all. The pupils were given a task to write a composition of at least one hundred and fifty words under normal examination conditions.

The study revealed that pupils had generally not understood the rule involved in the use of capital letters. The areas where errors were more prominent involved proper nouns, beginning of a sentence, poor background knowledge of letter shapes, overgeneralisation and not capitalising the first word in the closing of a letter.

**Keywords:** capitalization; discourse; lexico-grammar; productive skills; receptive skills

### Introduction

Second language (L<sub>2</sub>) learners often face a number of difficulties in their attempt to learn a second language. Some of the difficulties they encounter can be as a result of the effects of their first language (L<sub>1</sub>). When two languages have some similarities structurally or phonologically, second language learners will find it less difficult to learn such languages. However, studies have shown that

differences between languages at the phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic levels normally constitute a source of learning difficulty (Khansir, 2012; Ellis, 2008; Corder, 1967; Londoño Vásquez, 2008).

The role of English as an international language has been emphasised by Yadav & Naragana (2018), although in Nepal they state that English is used only as a medium of instruction in private schools, colleges and universities. The

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situation in Sierra Leone is however different from that of Nepal. In Sierra Leone, English remains to be the official language and it is used as a subject of instruction as well as a medium of instruction throughout the educational system. This underscores the fact that students in Sierra Leone are expected to be familiar and knowledgeable in all the four language skills, i.e. listening, reading, speaking and writing. Joseph (2019) supports the fact that in the process of language learning, students need to be encouraged to use all their four skills as this will make them all-round learners. The Language Arts syllabus makes provisions for pupils to acquire mastery in each of these skills as they are tested at the end of the three years of Junior Secondary School. This study, which focuses on the writing skills carefully attempts to look at how Junior Secondary School pupils use capital letters in writing their compositions. The use of capital letters and punctuation marks poses a lot of problems for second language learners of English. This has been one of the reasons why pupils' performance in essay writing particularly and Language Arts generally has been poor. As a result of pupils' failure to use capital letters correctly, many of them most often lose marks in the area of mechanical accuracy. Rezeq & Elmassri (2019) state that writing is not only about translating what the students think about a suggested topic; writing about the topic also means that students should be able to use correct capitalisation as this will enable them score more marks overall. Students therefore require training in the use of capital letters in addition to being able to present their ideas and thoughts clearly in writing. Rozimela & Wahyuni (2019) in their study of students' writing ability of academic texts found out that although students were comfortable in composing their ideas, they found difficulty in the appropriate use of discourse and lexico-grammar. Since they had grammar problems, this makes it difficult sometimes to understand their essays. The difficulty is further compounded by their poor use of capitalisation.

The rules of the use of punctuation marks need to be emphasised as the wrong use of these punctuation marks distorts the intended meaning by writers. Although the wrong use of capital letters does not necessarily distort the meaning of a sentence, it however causes candidates to lose marks when they write compositions, which affects their overall performance in public examinations. It is therefore important for second language learners to be familiar with the rules of using capital letters.

Several studies have been undertaken in an attempt to provide reasons for the prevalence of errors in the process of language acquisition and learning. One of the main discoveries resulting in errors committed by second language learners in these studies is the lack of adequate knowledge of the rules governing the use of the language (Richards, 1971 & 1974; James, 1989 & 1998; Norrish, 1983; Ellis, 1995).

This study deals with one of the aspects involved in learning English as a second or foreign language. In more precise terms, it examines one of the numerous and somewhat "invisible" challenges learners struggle with in the writing process. It is referred to as "invisible" because most people, even educators, do not seem to attach much seriousness to it. The issue being referred to here is that of incorrect use of capitalisation or errors in the use of capitalisation. For the majority of users, they are more concerned with the message/ meaning of the text. In other words, much emphasis is put on adequacy of content, appropriate use of vocabulary and correct expression rather than on other aspects - failing to acknowledge the fact that for a person to be regarded as a proficient user of a language, he/she must exhibit mastery of all the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The subject under discussion has direct bearing with the writing skill. A learner who has mastered this particular skill would hardly commit any grammatical or mechanical error; this includes errors of capitalisation.

The importance of English in Sierra Leone cannot be overemphasized. It is the official language; it is the medium of instruction used at all levels of the educational system; all textbooks and other teaching and learning materials are written in English (with the exception of those used for teaching indigenous and foreign languages); children are introduced to English at a very early stage in their schooling; all examinations are written in English. Because English plays such a crucial role in the educational system, it must be afforded the attention it deserves.

Learning a language involves taking cognisance of both productive skills (speaking and writing) and receptive skills (listening and reading). The productive skills, however, should be given more weight as they are more performance based. There are errors associated with each of the productive modes. As was mentioned earlier, incorrect capitalisation is a mechanical or grammatical error that students commit when writing. Some sources state that it ranks among the top ten grammatical errors committed by students and therefore must be seriously considered. The most common rule about capitalisation states that the first letter of a sentence should be written in upper case. One should always capitalise the name of a person, a company, days of the week, months of the year, holidays, institutions, first letter in the salutation and closing of a letter, titles, abbreviations and acronyms. In general, one should capitalise proper names and formal titles but not common nouns. These and other capitalisation rules not mentioned should be observed when writing.

It is obvious that learners always commit errors in their attempt to learn a second language. Errors in second language learning are considered as good indicators of the progress the learners are making in the learning process.

Sinha (2018:175-176) cited in Selinker (1969) states that identification of errors is important for the following reasons:

- (1) It is helpful for the language teacher because error identification indicates the learner's progress in language learning.
- (2) The language researcher also benefits from the identification of errors as they provide insights into how language is learnt.
- (3) Identifying an error is significant to the language learner himself/herself as he/she gets involved in hypothesis testing.

In the writing process, learners need to be given sufficient feedback relating to the use of capitalisation. This is because these learners have not mastered the skill in their first language. It is therefore highly unlikely that most second language learners in Sierra Leone will find difficulty in the use of capitalisation as they may not have gained sufficient mastery in this area.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this study is to investigate errors in the use of capitalisation among Junior Secondary School (JSS) pupils in selected schools in Bo District.

The specific objectives of the study include the following:

1. Identify categories of capitalisation errors committed by JSS pupils in the selected schools.
2. Describe the errors of capitalisation committed by pupils at the JSS level in the selected schools.
3. Explain why JSS pupils in the selected schools commit certain capitalisation errors.
4. Proffer suggestions that might help minimize the problem.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study, as has already been mentioned, seeks to investigate the issue of incorrect use of capitalisation among Junior Secondary School pupils in selected schools in Bo District, Southern Sierra Leone. This challenge is not peculiar only to the targeted group (JSS pupils); it is encountered by learners of English at various levels of our educational system. The findings in this study will provide the much needed information that would inform teachers of Language Arts about the errors of capitalisation committed by learners at the JSS level. Pupils themselves will become aware of the sort of errors they have been committing. It might also serve as a useful piece of information to curriculum designers, text book developers, teachers of early grades, and other interested persons who are passionate about developing proficient users of English as a second or foreign language. Some teachers, especially those who teach non language subjects, tend to treat this issue with triviality. Most are mainly concerned with content and,

perhaps to a certain degree, the use of expression. This, however, should not be the case. Every teacher should endeavour to instil in their learners good writing habits. One must not lose sight of the fact that these learners are being trained to gain mastery in the use of the English Language so that they will be able to perform in their academic work and eventually become adequately prepared for the world of work.

### **Methodology**

The design adopted for this study is a descriptive one in which participants were drawn from Junior Secondary School pupils from three schools in the Bo Municipality, Southern Sierra Leone. The content analysis method was used in this study, and it focuses on using the written text of learners to find out the occurrence of errors in the use of capital letters. Even though three schools were selected in the Bo Municipality it is hoped that the results obtained in this study will represent a very near accurate reflection of what obtains in the other Junior Secondary Schools. The study was conducted in three Junior Secondary Schools, namely Government Secondary School, Bo (all male), Methodist High School (mixed sex) and Queen of the Rosary School (all female). The selection of the schools was purposively done to ensure gender parity. In each of the said schools, 50 pupils were randomly chosen (25 pupils from JSS 3 and 25 pupils from JSS 2). Pupils were mainly chosen from JSS 2 and 3 because it is believed that they have spent a longer time at the JSS level as compared to JSS 1 who had been newly admitted into the secondary school. A total of 150 pupils were sampled altogether.

In each of the selected schools, the pupils were given a test to write an informal letter using the normal examination condition to administer the test. They were asked to write a letter to a friend who lives in another country describing their school compound to the said friend. In order to conduct the test, class teachers of each of these classes were requested to assist in administering the test. The pupils were given clear instructions and worked under normal examination conditions. That is, they allowed the normal time to write a composition, and were not allowed to discuss with their colleagues during the course of the test. At the end of the test, the scripts were collected and marked, the emphasis being picking out errors of capitalisation. The rules of capitalisation served as guidelines/criteria for marking. Capitalisation errors identified were categorised under various headings listed in the tables below. The results were presented using simple statistical calculations of percentages to determine the number errors in the use of the rule of capitalisation by pupils.

### **Results**

The results of the findings are presented below using simple percentages to represent the number of capitalisation errors committed by the pupils.

Below are tables showing the categories of capitalisation errors identified; the number of candidates who committed a particular type of error and the corresponding percentage.

Table 1 shows that the test administered at Bo Government School, the following categories of errors and corresponding results were obtained. 32 out of 50 candidates (64 %) did not capitalise the first letter at the beginning of sentences; 46 out of 50 (92 %) wrote proper nouns that were not capitalised; 5 out of 50 (10 %) wrote the pronoun “I” in lower case; 5 out of 50 (10 %) wrote names of days of the week or months of the year using lower case letters; 36 out 50 (72%) committed the error of over generalisation, that is using capital letters for almost anything they consider a name (for example – colour names, other adjectives, common nouns); 27 out of the 50 candidate (54 %) committed errors apparently related to poor background knowledge of letter shapes and sizes – this particular group of candidates littered their text with capital letters. This means that they used capital letters even when they were not necessary. For errors related to acronyms and abbreviations, 15 out of 50 (30%) were found wanting; 21 out of 50 (42%) did not capitalise the first word in the closing of the letter and 5 out of 50 (10%) did not capitalise

titles preceding names of people. The results further reveal that the most challenging areas for this this group were the use of capital letters with proper nouns; overgeneralisation in the use of capitalisation and not beginning sentences with capital letters.

From marked scripts of candidates of Methodist High School the following errors were detected - not writing the first letter of a sentence with a capital letter - 32 out of 50 (64%); not capitalising proper nouns – 45 out of 50 (90%); 6 out of 50 candidates (12%) wrote the pronoun “I” in lower case; not capitalising names of days of the week and months of the year – 1 out of 50 (02%); 8 out of 50 (16%) committed errors of overgeneralisation; 20 out of 50 (40%) committed errors related poor background knowledge of letter shapes; not capitalising acronyms and abbreviations - 10 out of 50 (20%); 26 out of 50 (52%) did not capitalise the first word in the closing of the letter; 2 out of 50 (04%) committed the error of not capitalising titles. From the results it became apparent that the most challenging areas for these candidates were as follows; not capitalising proper nouns; not beginning sentences with capital letters; not capitalising the first word in the closing of a letter (Table 2).

**Table 1:** Bo Government Secondary School - 50 pupils

S.N.	Categories of Errors Identified	No. of Candidates Committing the Error	Percentage
1.	Not capitalising beginning of a sentence	32/50	64 %
2.	Not capitalising proper nouns (including parts of compound nouns)	46/50	92 %
3.	Not capitalising the pronoun “I”	05/50	10 %
4.	Not capitalising names of days of the week and months of the year	05/50	10 %
5.	Overgeneralisation	36/50	72 %
6.	Poor background knowledge of letter shapes	27/50	54 %
7.	Not capitalising acronyms and abbreviations	15/50	30 %
8.	Not capitalising the first word in the closing of a letter	21/50	42 %
9.	Not capitalising titles (example – Mr, Mrs, Dr)	05/50	10 %

**Table 2:** Methodist High School – 50 pupils

S.N.	Categories of Errors Identified	No. of Candidates Committing the Error	Percentage
1.	Not capitalising beginning of a sentence	32/50	64 %
2.	Not capitalising proper nouns (including parts of compound nouns)	45/50	90 %
3.	Not capitalising the pronoun “I”	06/50	12 %
4.	Not capitalising names of days of the week and months of the year	01/50	02 %
5.	Overgeneralisation	08/50	16 %
6.	Poor background knowledge of letter shapes	20/50	40 %
7.	Not capitalising acronyms and abbreviations	10/50	20 %
8.	Not capitalising the first word in the closing of a letter	26/50	52 %
9.	Not capitalising titles (example – Mr, Mrs, Dr)	02/50	04 %

The Table 3 represents results obtained from scripts marked from the test administered at Queen of the Rosary School which revealed the following results: not capitalising the beginning of a sentence - 24 out of 50 (48%); not capitalising proper nouns - 44 out 50 (88%); not capitalising the pronoun “I” – 10 out of 50 (20%); not capitalising names of days of the week and months of the year, 8 out of 50 (16%); errors related to overgeneralisation – 29 out 50 (58%); poor background knowledge of letter shapes – 32 out of 50 (64%); for not capitalising acronyms and abbreviations – 6 out of the 50 scripts marked (12%) contained these errors; 25 out of the 50 candidates (50%) who took the test did not capitalise the first word in the closing of the letter; none of the 50 scripts marked contained the error of not capitalising titles. The results clearly indicate that candidates are mostly challenged in the following areas – using capital letters for proper nouns; poor background knowledge of letter shapes; overgeneralisation in the use of capitalisation.

Table 4 gives a comprehensive picture of the various capitalisation errors committed by the candidates to whom the test was administered in the selected schools. Besides, the different categories of errors are ranked according to the degree to which they were committed – beginning with most committed to the least committed capitalisation error. As can be clearly seen, 135 out of 150 candidates (90%) that took the test committed errors related to not capitalising

proper nouns. This number includes those who capitalised compound nouns partially or incorrectly. For example, the name of a country is written as ‘Sierra leone’ – only the first part is capitalised. This particular error had the highest frequency. Second is the error of not capitalising the beginning of a sentence – this particular type was detected on 88 out of 150 scripts (58.7 %). The third most occurring category had to do with errors related to poor background knowledge of letter shapes; 79 out of 150 scripts marked contained these (an average of 52.7%). For this particular category, candidates just littered their papers with capital letters; these apparently do not seem to understand that capital letters are specialised letters and therefore could not be used indiscriminately. Next on the list are those who committed the error of overgeneralisation, 73 out of 150 (48.7%) – for them nearly everything that is a name should be capitalised; such includes names of colours, other adjectives – big, good, clean. It was found out that on these scripts many common nouns were capitalised. It was observed that 73 out of 150 candidates that took the test did not capitalise the first word in the closing of the letter that was written. This accounted for an average of 48%. At the lower tiers were the following categories of capitalisation errors: not capitalising acronyms and abbreviations – 31 out of 50 (20.7 %); not capitalising the pronoun “I” – 21 out of 50 (14%); not capitalising names of days and months – 14 out of 50 (9.3%); not capitalising titles – 07 out of 150 (4.7%).

**Table 3:** Queen of the Rosary School – 50 pupils

S.N.	Categories of Errors Identified	No. of Candidates Committing the Error	Percentage
1.	Not capitalising beginning of a sentence	24/50	48 %
2.	Not capitalising proper nouns (including parts of compound nouns)	44/50	88 %
3.	Not capitalising the pronoun “I”	10/50	20 %
4.	Not capitalising names of days of the week and months of the year	08/50	16 %
5.	Overgeneralisation	29/50	58 %
6.	Poor background knowledge of letter shapes	32/50	64 %
7.	Not capitalising acronyms and abbreviations	06/50	12 %
8.	Not capitalising the first word in the closing of a letter	25/50	50 %
9.	Not capitalising titles (example – Mr, Mrs, Dr)	0/50	0 %

**Table 4:** Overall Results (the three schools combined) – 150 pupils

S.N.	Categories of Errors Identified	No. of Candidates Committing the Error	Corresponding Percentage
1.	Not capitalising proper nouns (including parts of compound nouns)	135/150	90 %
2.	Not capitalising beginning of a sentence	88/150	58.7 %
3.	Poor background knowledge of letter shapes	79/150	52.7 %
4.	Overgeneralisation	73/150	48.7 %
5.	Not capitalising the first word in the closing of a letter	72/150	48 %
6.	Not capitalising acronyms and abbreviations	31/150	20.7 %
7.	Not capitalising the pronoun “I”	21/150	14 %
8.	Not capitalising names of days of the week and months of the year	14/150	9.3 %
9.	Not capitalising titles (example – Mr, Mrs, Dr)	07/150	4.7 %

## **Conclusions and Discussion**

After having carefully examined each of the 150 scripts collected (50 per school), the following were observed:

- Each script contained one or more types of capitalisation errors
- Capitalisation errors identified included not using capital letters for items indicated on the tables below
- Some errors had to do with poor background knowledge of letter shapes and overgeneralisation, for example, using capital letters for colour names and other adjectives
- It was also observed that some errors come about as a result poor or inadequate orientation on the use of capitalisation particularly at the lower levels of schooling

From the results obtained it could be seen that pupils at the JSS level in the selected schools do not have a thorough grasp of the concept of capitalisation. Even the most common rule about capitalisation which states that one should write the first letter of a sentence with a capital letter was a challenge for over half of the candidates to whom the test was administered. It was observed that the majority of the candidates had challenges in the area of capitalising proper nouns. Two other areas that featured prominently were errors of capitalisation relating to poor background knowledge of letter shapes and overgeneralisation. It was also surprising to note that nearly half of the candidates who took the test did not capitalise the first word in the closing of the letter that they were asked to write. Even capitalisation errors found at the lower tiers of the table above were ones that one would not expect pupils at the JSS level to commit. These included names of days of the week and months of the year (things that are dealt with right from class 1); the pronoun "I" and titles preceding names of people (for example – Mr, Dr, Mrs). The marked scripts revealed that every candidate that took the test committed one type of capitalisation error or the other mentioned above. Another interesting discovery was that some pupils just use capital letters randomly; they litter their work with capital letters. From what was observed during marking, this sort of thing arises as a result of poor background knowledge of letter shapes. Capitalisation of common acronyms and initial letter abbreviation also confuse many pupils as the results reveal.

## **Recommendations**

Based on observations and results obtained from the tests administered, the following suggestions are being proffered to help improve the current situation.

Teachers of English Language, especially those at the early grades, should encourage their learners to develop good writing habits (in terms of letter shapes and sizes). Pupils at

the early grades must have adequate practice in writing; teachers are encouraged to use active learning teaching methods to help pupils grasp the concept of capitalisation; a lot of visual aids (charts showing names of days, months, pupils' names, names of districts, rivers; flash cards, alphabet strips, pupils' name tags) should be used to concretise learning.

Teachers of Language Arts at the JSS level should inculcate good writing practices in their learners; learners should be exposed to the criteria for grading. They should be made to understand that appropriate content is just part of the criteria, and not fulfilling the other areas will affect them negatively.

At the upper primary and JSS level, all aspects of writing must be treated seriously, those of grammar and mechanics. The following points on capitalisation must be emphasised

- Every sentence must begin with a capital letter
- Proper nouns including parts of compound nouns must be capitalised
- The pronoun "I" must be capitalised
- Names of days of the week and months of the year should be capitalised
- Capital letters are specialised letters and therefore should not be used indiscriminately; learners should be encouraged to shape their letters properly
- Acronyms and abbreviations must be capitalised; pupils should be encouraged to consult a recent dictionary if they are unsure about a particular acronym /abbreviation.
- Titles preceding names of people must be capitalised
- The first word in the closing of a letter must be capitalised

To ensure that these and other rules are taken seriously, teachers should (as was mentioned earlier) share their scoring criteria with the learners; these criteria must include a component for grammar and mechanics. When learners are fully aware of the fact that such errors militate against them, they would work hard to overcome them, and by the time they get to the end of JSS they would have internalised the concept.

Learners should endeavour to proofread any text they create as some of these errors might be as a result of carelessness.

Learners should refrain from imitating social media models; social media has impacted negatively on the use of writing conventions.

It is also advised that teachers of other disciplines (teachers of non-language subjects) make it a point of duty to give grades not only for content and expression but also for the correct use capitalisation and punctuation. If a learner is to

be labelled a proficient user of English, he or she must master all the four skills and their components. Therefore, the area of proper use of capitalisation must receive due attention.

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