Classroom Experience of Teaching-Writing to Undergraduate Students: Bangladesh Context

Sureya Huda[*]
Nafisa Kamal[**]

Abstract

The English language proficiency skill of most learners in Bangladesh when they get admitted in the university, whether public or private, it has been noticed, is quite poor. The authors of this paper have been involved with teaching the writing course in a private university across the curriculum. They have looked into student problem areas and have tried to tailor teaching strategies according to the needs of the undergraduate students there. This paper reflects their experiences in the use of innovative classroom strategies to develop the writing skill of students over 3 semesters, i.e. one year. The paper reflects their efforts, their success and their limitations over the one year period. The purpose of this study is to explore and share the classroom experience of the authors in teaching writing to undergraduate students and to reflect on student development in that area.

Keywords: Language proficiency, learners, curriculum, strategies

1. Introduction

Most universities in Bangladesh, whether public or private, offer foundation English courses. These courses in the particular university referred to in this paper deal with English reading comprehension and grammar in context, the listening and speaking skills and the writing skill. This is a necessity especially in private universities as the medium of instruction across the curriculum is English, and the English language proficiency level of the undergraduate student is generally not satisfactory. Students find especially the written demands of their courses extremely challenging.

Private universities follow a semester system and most students find they have very limited time to prepare for their courses. In addition to this, their poor hold on the medium of instruction i.e. English, makes the situation even worse. Most of the examinations in these universities is written, so the writing foundation course is of utmost importance.

Bangladesh is a monolingual country and students have a lack of exposure to the English language especially where writing in English is concerned. Besides the medium of

[*] *Assistant Professor, Department of English, Eastern University*
[**] *Senior Lecturer, Department of Applied Linguistics and ELT, Eastern University*

instruction for the majority of students is Bangla up to high school level. In their daily lives students hardly write anything in English outside the English class in school.

Writing, even in the mother tongue is difficult and learned through a process of instruction generally in school. Where a foreign language is concerned, students in the initial stages have to learn a new script too. They can hardly speak or read in the foreign language and writing is a difficult language skill to master. In order to write properly in English, the student needs to learn certain sentence structures in that language , to organize ideas in such a way that it can be understood by a reader and have a range of vocabulary which will help in expressing the thought accurately. Most Bangladeshi students have a lack of these. Unfortunately, the intrinsic motivation to develop the skill on one's own is also missing. Thus it is up to the instructor to help motivate and use teaching strategies to make the students practice and so improve writing efficiency in English as far as possible given the constraints of time and background of students.

The research in this paper is of classroom situations present in a private university in the capital city, Dhaka. The writing course under study runs across the curriculum, that is, for the faculties of Business Administration, Law, Engineering and Arts. The experience and analysis of teaching the course, the information gained therein and the results achieved are discussed in this paper. The course code and name is: Eng 111 (Writing). It is a 2 credit hour course, but has been given the weightage of a 3 credit hour course, keeping in mind the need and importance therein of developing the writing skill of the students. The subjects of this study were from the faculties of business, law and arts (Department of English). These students were taught in the said course for one semester each, either spring, summer or fall, 2009. For a bachelor degree, students have to study for 4 years, in a trimester year. The particular course under study in this paper is a second semester course.

2. Student Background in the Undergraduate Classroom

Universities in Bangladesh are present either in the capital or in some important cities/towns. Students interested in university education, generally either live in these cities/towns, or come from areas close to it.

It is important to know the percentage of rural / urban students in the classroom, because except in some rare cases, it has been noticed that students with an urban background get higher scores in the general section of the admission test (which is an entry requirement in the university and is an English language test) than those coming from rural areas. This information helps teachers to understand the class proficiency level and accordingly set learner activities, for in order to be effective and meaningful, the tasks should relate to the real life situation of the learner.

Figures 1,2 and 3 given below show the total distribution of students in the classroom in 3 faculties, Business Administration, Arts and Law in the University under study. The

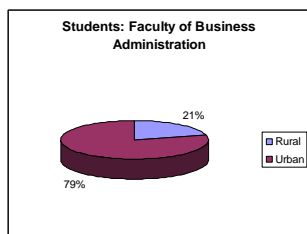percentages taken are from a survey of classrooms on the basis of rural and urban students present there.

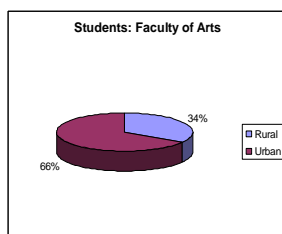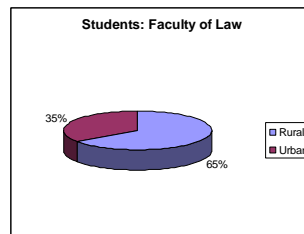|		
Students: Faculty of Business Administration 21% 79% ☐ Rural ☐ Urban	**Students: Faculty of Arts** 34% 66% ☐ Rural ☐ Urban	**Students: Faculty of Law** 35% 65% ☐ Rural ☐ Urban
Figure 1	Figure 2	Figure 3

a. Figure 1 is   taken from a survey of most classroom situations of the university under the Faculty of Business Administration. This figure shows that out of the total students under consideration, From this faculty 79% belong to the urban area while 21% come from an rural background at the undergraduate level, where exposure to the English language occurs mainly in the classroom.

b. Figure 2 is taken from a survey of classroom situation under the Faculty of Arts, Department of English, at the undergraduate level. This figure shows a slight dip in urban student population from statistics in (a), that is, 66 % from an urban setting, while a little higher rural student population , that is , 34%.

c. Similarly Figure 3 shows the student distribution in the Faculty of Law. Here the urban student population is low in comparison to Figures 1 & 2. Students belonging to the city comprise only 35% of the total student body, while 65% come from a rural background.

3. Analysis of Student Background

Figures 1,2 and 3 are taken from a survey of most classroom situations of the university under this study and show that approximately 38% to 42% of the total students under consideration from the Faculties of Arts, Business Administration and Law at the undergraduate level come from a completely rural background where exposure to the English language occurs mainly in the classroom.

About 58% students come from urban setting, but this does not mean that their English proficiency level is fairly good. In the scale of English proficiency level they are relatively on a higher scale than the 42% who come from completely rural background but that too is not quite up to the mark. (All statistics are taken from the General Section of the Admission Test, which is an entry level requirement at the undergraduate level in the University. This section is an English language test that comprises 40 marks from a total of 100 marks.)

4. Description of Students Under Study

Another survey of the class situation at the undergraduate level in the university shows that approximately 99% of most students, both from urban and rural backgrounds, come from Bangla medium pre-university education background. Only about 1% has an English medium background.

All Bangla medium schools have English as a subject from classes 1-12. This means students study English for 12 years. Result of some students is quite high, but results do not always reflect actual achievement level. A student with high marks in English quite often performs poorly in the quizzes/exams at the undergraduate level in the university, for examinations in English up to high school level, are all written, and the teaching experience of the authors (who have been teachers/examiners of scripts at the higher secondary level) show that students quite often write memorized answers. (The note books on English and notes available in the coaching centers are further proof of this.)

Student achievement level in class quizzes / exams at the university show that approximately 10% has a fair command, while 20% has an average command, and the rest 70% are poor achievers in the English language.

Again, the class quizzes / exams also indicate that students very often do not possess the skill of developing and organizing the content of a piece of writing clearly and convincingly. They are unable to properly link ideas and information across sentences to develop a topic. They fail to use a range of sentence structure or vocabulary. Using correct grammar, punctuation and spelling is also quite often missing in student writing. Students it is noticed do not have ideas of paragraph formation or of using the conventions of layout correctly.

The data above proves that students are used to a product approach in writing. Set topics are given, to which memorized answers are produced in the examinations. As such real learning in the writing skill development does not take place. Sometimes students cannot even produce a single sentence correctly in English.

5. Significance of the Study

All the issues discussed above imply that the writing skill of students needs to be looked into rigorously. Students need to be initiated into process writing and require to be made aware of the fact that all writing involves stages and that each stage can be learned. As writing a proper paragraph consists the core of the writing course, since a paragraph has all the elements of organization that any piece of writing requires like introduction, body, conclusion and cohesion and coherence, so students need to be elaborately introduced into the process of writing a paragraph.

We need to help our students understand the importance of structure in writing and what a paragraph is and how to write a coherent one suited to the audience and the topic with which they are working. We also need to help students understand the importance of

making clear connections between ideas and the relative merits of various kinds of sentences and a range of vocabulary and punctuation. This study is focused towards helping students overcome their deficiencies and removing as far as possible the writing anxiety that most of them possess, to enable them to ultimately write correctly and freely.

6. Product Versus Process Writing

David Nunan (1999) shows how the 'process' approach is different from the traditional product-oriented approach. The main difference is that the product approach gives importance to the writing task which is imitated and copied from teacher supplied models, while the process approach focuses on the stages involved in writing a piece of composition. The goal of the product writing is to produce an error-free coherent text. Process writing however gives importance to the fact that a writer will develop the writing skill by producing, discussing, reviewing and reworking successive drafts of a text.

The fact that process writing evolved as a reaction to the product approach, and that it met the need to make the writing processes like those processes inherent while writing in one's mother tongue, is also supported by Jordan (1997). This however does not indicate that there is no need for the product approach, that it does not have any practical applications. In fact, the process approach may contain some elements of product-based writing. Nunan (1999) says that a writing program can contain elements of both approaches. As such, each of the stages mentioned above will be considered while dealing with writing in the class.

The product approach is a traditional approach to teaching writing in which students are provided a model and encouraged to mimic it in order to produce a similar product. The process approach on the other hand focuses more on the process of getting to the product, by using techniques such as brainstorming, exploring ideas, peer editing and rewriting.

In the mid-1960s new developments in developing the writing skill came up. Instead of a product-oriented model, a new theory regarding the writing process started being used in writing courses. This included: pre-writing --- writing --- re-writing stages. As one early researcher said, by examining and emphasizing process rather than product, teachers could shift focus to creation from recognition, to method from content, to thought from meaninglessness. In this context, Meriwether (1997) notes that writing is a process which involves some steps. The basic steps are:

- Prewriting (selecting a topic and planning what to say)
- Writing (putting a draft version on paper)
- Revising (making changes to improve the writing)
- Evaluation (assessment of the written work)

For the purpose of this study and the convenience of the classroom situation, the above steps were at first formulated into the following 5 stages of writing.

The five stages of the writing process include:

- Prewriting
- Drafting
- Revising
- Editing
- Publishing (submitting to the instructor)

From the above 5 stages the authors came to the 3 tier writing process:

1. pre-writing
2. while-writing (drafting, revising and editing)
3. post- writing (publishing/ submitting to the instructor)

7. Course Outline for the Writing Course: Eng 111

Course Objectives

1. Making simple sentences or phrases
2. Writing simple compositions such as descriptions and simple comparisons etc. that have a main idea and some detail
3. Using the writing process to write brief narratives and simple stories
4. Using basic vocabulary and structures in a piece of writing
5. Revising writing for proper use of punctuation, capitals and correct spelling
6. Using linkers appropriately in written text
7. Editing own writing for basic conventions
8. Revising own writing with teacher/peer assistance to clarify meaning and improve language and organization
9. Using common verbs, nouns, modifiers in simple sentences
10. Applying pre-writing strategies and developing a draft

Writing Content Areas

- **Mid-Term Examination**

   1. Paragraph writing types

   a. Descriptive
   b. Narrative

   2. Written text types

   a. Simple comparisons
   b. Directions
   c. Instructions

3. Dialogue writing

4. Letters types
   a. Personal
   b. Official (academic purposes)

- **Final Examination**

1. Essay writing types
   a. Narrative
   b. Descriptive

2. Story writing (guided, with clues)

3. Amplification

4. Summary writing (simple passages)

8. The writing process in the class

Students were elaborately introduced into the process of writing a paragraph.

a) The 3 tier writing process was introduced in class i.e.,
   - pre – writing
   - while writing
   - post writing

b) Pre- writing in the initial stages included input into structure of a paragraph, importance of the audience, cohesion, coherence and organization in paragraph writing. After this brainstorming for ideas dealing with the topic in hand was done as a class activity. Sometimes, depending on the learners ability, semantic mapping, outlining ideas, clustering ideas etc. was practiced along with appropriate vocabulary and relevant sentence structures and other appropriate language material.

c) While- writing: This involved preparing the first draft. Peer discussions helped in revising and editing and interaction amongst students whether in pairs or groups or the class as a whole, made the task in hand lively and motivating. Discreet monitoring by the instructor helped students to write more effectively.

d) Post- writing activities involved assessment by peers/teacher.

9. The Role of Input in Writing

An important issue in second language acquisition theories is that in order for language acquisition to take place some second language data or language input must be made available to the language learner. Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis further states that it is important that the language data is understood by the learner , that is, comprehensible input. The teacher is responsible for providing the comprehensible input, and as such, tailors the second language data according to the need of the learner. According to Krashen (1982), comprehensible input should slightly exceed the current ability of the learner (the i + 1 theory). This provides a challenge to the learner and helps in motivating him/her, thus helping in developing language competency.

Comprehensible input was used for improving writing competency of the learner in the classroom in this study. The background of the students, their language level and the range of language familiar to the students in their pre – requisite courses, was taken into consideration before preparing the language data or comprehensible input. This was used in the pre – writing stage while brainstorming for ideas, doing semantic mapping activities etc. to provide second language support to the learner to help facilitate writing competency and remove language anxiety.

For the purpose of this study, both acquisition and learning are used synonymously as are the terms learner and student. Furthermore input refers to both language data and its intake or assimilation.

10. Co-operative Learning

Cooperative learning is an important concept being dealt with in this research.According to Johnson & Johnson (1998), cooperative learning is grouping students together to accomplish shared learning goals. Students work in small groups of three or four to get the most out of their own learning and each other's learning. They encourage and support each other to learn and are responsible for their own as well as their teammates' learning.

Johnson & Johnson (1998) also said that cooperative learning is a student centered approach that believes that active learning is more effective than a passive one where the teacher becomes a facilitator rather than an instructor. Through cooperative learning, students have to exchange ideas, make plans and propose solutions to accomplish a collaborative goal. Therefore, it can enhance students' social and personal developments.

Achievement is another important concept being dealt with in this research. In this research, achievements can be categorized as achievement in academic performance and social development in acquiring English language by using cooperative learning approach.

Achievement in academic performance refers to the positive effects of cooperative learning on academic achievement among the students. It also means that cooperative learning can promote higher academic achievement and greater motivation than individual learning. Achievement in social development refers to the positive effects of cooperative learning on social relationships among students in the same group. All students, regardless of their ability levels and social backgrounds have the opportunity to develop positive and productive relationships (Slavin, 1985). Positive and productive relationships promote communication and increase the participation of students. It is believed that through this cooperative learning, students can learn from each other and establish closer ties and become more confident. Looking into all the aspects mentioned above, students were encouraged to do pair and group work in class.

11. Sample Lesson in Writing a Paragraph

A sample lesson is provided below to show how the authors conducted process writing in class and the manner in which comprehensible input was used to support, encourage and motivate the students into getting involved with writing a composition in the target language. The sample below also shows how some elements of product writing have been incorporated in process writing.

One of the lessons that the students do is **describing people**. They have a similar activity in their speaking class. They are familiar with the vocabulary and sentence structure used for describing a person.

Reinforcement of the vocabulary that they did in the previous semester	Students talk about the vocabulary needed for describing appearance and character
Supply new vocabulary	Face-thin, round, oval etc. Hair-straight, wavy, curly, receding, bold etc. Build- medium, slim, plump, overweight, thin etc. Height- tall, short, medium etc. Overall appearance: smart, tidy, elegant, untidy etc. Personality: fun loving, outgoing, serious, studious, helpful, critical, rude etc.
Show a descriptive paragraph	Identify different vocabulary used for describing a person Organization of the paragraph Linkers
Brainstorming	Asked to think about the person sitting next to him/her **guided brainstorming:** A chart is provided to them – they are supposed to fill in the chart Name: Age: Relationship:

	Look	Personality
	Your feelings:	
Grammar	Present simple -Focus on third person singular number	
Draft	Student write their first draft	
Reading their work to the class	Students are randomly chosen to read their work aloud to the class Students acts as the first editor	
Teacher check the draft as the editor	Feedback is given to the students	
Second draft	Student improve on their writing	

12. Student Performance (Classroom Sample)

The graph below shows total student performance level in the writing class in one semester each, in the Faculties of Business Administration, Law and Arts.
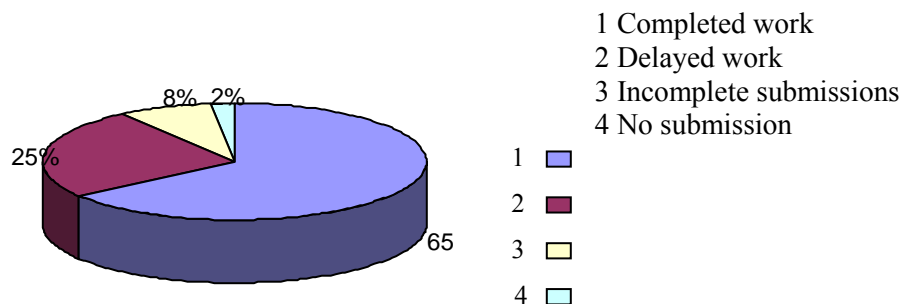

Figure 4: Analysis of Student Achievement

Analysis of total student performance is shown through the achievement graph (Figure 4) which shows how the students performed in one trimester, that is, in one semester each in the Faculties of Business Administration, Law and Arts in the University under study over one year. Figure 4 shows 65% of students submitted work at the proper time and showed improvement in the writing skill in the areas of content, layout, organization, coherence, cohesion , vocabulary, sentence structures etc. over a period of one semester i.e. 4 months. These students were satisfied with their progress and expressed approval of the teaching technique.

25% of students did not submit work at the proper time, i.e. submitted late work and received a penalty grade, a little lower than the deserved grade.

About 8% students gave incomplete work, that is to say they did not submit the complete number of tasks assigned, while the remaining 2% hardly did any work. The latter comprised of irregular students, who dropped out on a course.

A questionnaire given to students revealed that the majority of students or 65%, when process writing was first introduced and all were asked to maintain a portfolio of their writings, were somewhat reluctant, as writing is a difficult skill, laborious and they were not in the habit of doing so much of writing tasks, with each task, filed, edited, rewritten and then assessed, all in one semester. At the end of the semester these 65% students had smiling faces who actually took pride in their portfolios and confessed that writing (any type including answers to questions on other subjects, preparing assignments, projects etc.) now seemed easier than before. 25% of the students who submitted delayed work also seemed satisfied with the teaching technique and their progress as a result, but admitted that due to being absent from class (for various reasons) were unable to reap the full benefits of this process. 10% of the students did not respond and remained silent.

13. Student Hurdles in Writing

a. Students as has already been mentioned were used to a system of product writing. Practicing process writing was a completely new orientation. Product approach focuses on writing tasks in which the learner imitates, copies and transforms teacher supplied models, the process approach focuses on the steps involved in creating a piece of work . 12 years of writing using the product approach created a sense of anxiety when using the process approach.

b. Students were used to memorizing compositions / answers etc. in English for purposes of examinations, quizzes and tests. The idea of going through the whole process of writing with the teacher as facilitator only, created fear and tension in them.

c. As students were dependent on models for composition writing, their ability to use a range of vocabulary, sentence structures, organizing, maintaining coherence and cohesion was not developed.

d. This feeling of incapacity to complete the writing task in hand in spite of teacher and peer support produced a lack of motivation in completing the writing task in hand.

e. Students not belonging to the Department of English felt the effort to be an added burden.

14. Strategies Used for Addressing Hurdles

a. The language anxiety facing students was to some extent removed by review of the language areas of the previous courses taken by them. The listening/speaking and reading/grammar courses offered reinforcement of language areas to students now doing the writing course. For example already in these previous courses they had talked and read of describing people. So writing a paragraph on describing people was just like a follow up activity. A quick review of the vocabulary and structures used therein helped build up confidence in the students.

b. An elaborate pre-writing activity, especially brainstorming, helped greatly with ideas, vocabulary, sentence structures, organization etc.

c. As students were divided into pairs and groups, both academic and social advantages of co-operative learning were achieved. Discussions, peer support, interest, motivation etc. were reaped as a result and no student felt alone and helpless to do the work.

d. The monotony of a strict academic atmosphere was relieved due to discussions and peer support and this added as an extra motivation to make students do the work in hand.

e. The alertness of the instructor's presence guided students towards task completion.

f. Students were asked to maintain a portfolio of the writing done throughout the semester. The drafts were also filed, and the final writing along with corrections gave the students a clear idea of the errors, and the rectifications required. Each final writing was assessed and marked throughout the semester and this portfolio of writings was accepted as an assignment and students received a final grade on it. This marking system proved to be a great motivator towards making the students complete the task.

g. The writing task was generally completed in class, and students were encouraged to ask questions when a difficulty arose. This provided confidence in students.

15. Limitations of this Study

This research is based on students of only one university and over a period of 3 semesters, that is, one year. The students belonged to the 2nd semester. The teachers belong to the English Department of the university under consideration, and were unable to get a feed-back, follow up as to student progress from the other faculties. This paper has dealt with one kind of writing, i.e. writing a paragraph, though as mentioned earlier, a paragraph forms more or less the core of all kinds of writing. It would be interesting to find out how these students perform in extended texts involving multiple paragraphs.

16. Suggestions and Recommendations

a. The instructor needs to be the motivator especially for those students not having English as their core course.

b. Students should be engaged in tasks. They should learning by doing and are using their own thinking abilities. The instructor should not impede by supplying too quick solutions to student problems, but should encourage and try to elicit rather than give the solution.

c. Providing prompt feedback by correcting scripts and returning to students helps rectify errors.

d. The writing tasks given to students should be simple and specific. Too complex work creates in students a sense of insecurity which negates the capacity and urge to do the work. This results in incomplete and unfinished work.

e. The instructor needs to be vigilant and alert while students are working on tasks. This is especially applicable where weak students are involved. In mixed ability groups, if the instructor is not alert, the stronger students might complete the task, leaving the weaker ones to learn nothing.

f. Telling students to maintain a portfolio of their writings and providing students with information as to how the paper will be graded and to what extent the final course grade will reflect their performance on their portfolio writing. This motivates students to finish their writing task on time.

g. Students could present both rough and final drafts to class/group, for feedback from other students. In this way weaker students would have a chance to learn from the stronger students in a cooperative instead of a competitive environment.

f. Co-ordination among teachers of different faculties of the same university would further enhance students' overall performance.

17. Conclusion

Greater co-ordination among teachers of different faculties could further enhance the development of the writing skill of students and thus help students not only to achieve higher grades but become competent users of their English writing skill. As the authors of this paper are teachers of the English department the students of this department who went through the process mentioned above, had the chance of continued follow up and feedback in the literature courses following the writing course. Students were made to maintain portfolios (or folders) and asked to do assignments and even question-answers through the 3-tier writing process. The authors were happy to note that over the forthcoming semesters these students showed a better hold on the writing skill. These students proved able to even answer to questions better and could complete assignments with greater ease and efficiency.

References

Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. New York: Longman 4th Ed., pp.

Byrne, D. (1991). *Teaching Writing Skills*. London & New York: Longman, pp.

Ellis, R. (1985). *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, pp.

Johnson, D.W.,& Johnson, R.T. (1986*). Circles of Learning: Co-operative Learning*. Edina, M N: Interaction Book Company, pp.

Jordan, R. R. (1997). *English for Academic Purposes: A Guide and Resource Book for Teachers* . Cambridge Language Teaching Library www.amazon.com/English-Academic-Purpo... - Cached - Similar

Littlewood, W. (1981). *Communicative Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.

Meriwether, N. W. (1997). *Strategies for Writing Successful Essays*. NTC Publishing, pp.
Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Teaching and Learning*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, pp.
Richards, J.C.& Rodgers, T.S. (1986). *Approaches & Methods in Language Teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp.

Simpson, A.' A Process Approach to Writing'. http://www.developing teachers.com/articles_tchtraining/pw 1_adam.html
Troyka, L.N., & Hesse, D. (2001). *Quick Access, Reference for Writers*. Prentice Hall, pp.
Thuy, N.H.H. (2009). Teaching efl in Vietnam: Problems and solution – a discussion from the outlook of applied linguistics. *VNU Journal of Science, Foreign Languages*, 25, 61-66, pp.

Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a Low-Anxiety Classroom Environment: What Does Language Anxiety Research Suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*, 75(4), pp. 426-439.