
Analysis of Errors in Paragraph Writing on Saudi EFL Students

Dr. Sobhana Nandyal Panduranga

Assistant Professor

Department of English

College of Sciences & Arts, Samtah

Jazan University, Jizan

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Abstract

The rapid growth of the software communications and usage of electronic gadgets is one of the major developments in the industry of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. There is a strong emphasis on global co-operation, conversation and exchange of information for which the knowledge of English is essential for all students of any discipline; as English is a living, growing, social and a global language. The purpose of this current study was to analyze the errors in paragraph writing skills of English among Undergraduate students of Jazan University. Both analytical and descriptive methods have been used to analyze and describe the errors committed by the students. An English paragraph writing test has been administered to the sample of the study. The data was analyzed by using the measures of central tendency, standard deviation and standard error. The findings from this study indicated that the participants do not have the desired paragraph writing skills in English. As most of preparatory classes are overcrowded, the students are less motivated in learning a foreign language like English. English language instructors should take the responsibility to motivate the students in a way to create interest towards learning English and it should be a stress free environment. They are requested to take steps to diagnose the different kinds of errors committed by students so as to improve their paragraph writing skills in English. Orientation programs should be conducted to all the language instructors in the university.

Key Words: Analyze, paragraph writing strategies.

Introduction

English Language Teaching is a challenging task for teachers and more challenging for the students to learn English as a foreign language. In Saudi Arabia, teaching of English starts at schools in grade 5. Majority of students even after completion of their school are not well equipped with the language skills. Though the curriculum and textbooks for the preparatory courses in the universities are good, the academic achievement of the students is much below the expectations. The universities in Saudi Arabia should take necessary measures to improve the academic achievement/ performance of the students. The students should at least possess the minimum levels of proficiency in all the English language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Grammar & Vocabulary) after the completion of their preparatory courses as this affects their overall performance in the college.

Of all the language skills, writing is perhaps one of the most demanding. It has to be deliberately cultivated. Writing aims at clear and efficient communication. Ann Raimes (1983) clearly stated the complexity of sub skills that make a piece of writing coherent, effective and communicative. They are:

1. The writing process – getting ideas, getting started, writing drafts, revising.
2. Audience – the readers.
3. Purpose – the reason for writing.

4. Word choice – vocabulary, idiom and tone.
5. Mechanics – handwriting, spelling, punctuation, etc.
6. Grammar – rules for verbs, agreement, articles, pronouns etc.
7. Syntax – sentence structure, sentence boundaries, stylistic choices, etc.
8. Contents – relevance, clarity, originality, logic, etc.
9. Organization – paragraphs, topic and support, cohesion and unity.

Need for the Study

Realizing the importance of English language in this global world and keeping in view the present needs, the teachers need to gear up the students to meet the competitive market. They play a vital role in developing the language skills in English among the students. When the students are less motivated, it is the responsibility of the English teachers to motivate the students. One of the reasons for students' low academic achievement could be the overcrowded classes, where the teachers cannot pay attention to individual students. When the class size is more in a writing class, neither the teacher nor the students can pay attention; and there is no scope for the development of language skills among the students. Their concentration would be on the completion of syllabus, preparing questions for exams and evaluation of the manuscripts, which implies that the focus is more on testing

than teaching and learning. The number of tests conducted is more and causing lot of stress among the students. There is every chance that it will affect their performance in other courses.

The teachers should take up some projects to diagnose the different kinds of errors committed by the students in different areas of the language like Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Grammar and Vocabulary. The teachers need to first identify the problems and the reasons for their low academic performance. Then, the teachers should take up some innovative measures to improve the standards and assist the students to improve their academic performance.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- To assess errors in paragraph writing on Saudi EFL students;
- To analyze errors in paragraph writing on Saudi EFL students;
- To suggest remedial measures in order to improve paragraph writing on Saudi EFL students.

Research Questions

1. Are the undergraduate students able to exhibit good paragraph writing skills in English?
2. How can paragraph writing skills in English be developed among undergraduate students?
3. What are the strategies that can be used to improve paragraph writing

skills in English among undergraduate students?

Method of the Study

Analytical and descriptive methods have been used to analyze and describe the errors committed by undergraduate students of Jazan University in English paragraph writing. For this purpose, an English paragraph writing test has been administered on the sample for the study.

Theoretical Background

Paragraph

In many languages, the fundamental unit of composition is a paragraph, which is an idea that is developed adequately. One can have great ideas, but if they are not presented in a systematic manner, the readers will not have interest; and the writer fails to achieve the goals in writing. A paragraph is a collection of related sentences dealing with a single topic. It consists of several sentences that are grouped together. These groups of sentences together discuss one main subject/ idea/ thought/ theme. There are three parts in a paragraph. They are the topic sentence, supporting details, and the concluding/closing sentence.

Features of a good Paragraph

A good paragraph assists the readers in comprehending a piece of writing. To be as effective as possible, a paragraph should have the following features:

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1. **Title** – to describe what the paragraph is about.
 2. **Purpose** – to bring the readers from a state of ignorance to a state of awareness.
 3. **Unity** – to focus on a single aspect (major point of discussion).
 4. **Coherence** – to be easily understood and meaningful. Logical and verbal bridges can help create coherence in the paragraphs. In logical bridges, the same idea is carried over from sentence to sentence. In verbal bridges, key words (Synonyms, pronouns, transitions, etc.) can be used.
 5. **Adequate development** - to be well developed, discussed, supported and concluded. One should be able to easily summarize what the paragraph is about.
 6. **Topic sentence** – to have a topic. Topic sentence is a general statement which indicates the main idea of the paragraph.
 7. **Emphasis** – to emphasize on the main/central idea.
 8. **Length** – to have the right number of words and sentences in the paragraph. The basic thumb rule is to keep one idea to one paragraph, along with the supporting evidence. A new idea should be in a new paragraph. If the paragraph starts to get too long, then each sub-topic should be elaborated in a new paragraph. As one's writing improves, they will be able to change the rules according to their needs.

9. **Format** – to start writing the paragraph in a specific format. There are two ways of starting a paragraph:
 - Indented format – leaving a few inches from the margin.
 - Block format – directly start from the margin.

These features should be kept in mind while writing a paragraph. Using and adapting them to one's individual purposes will help in constructing effective paragraphs.

Paragraph Construction

A new paragraph can be started when one –

- begins a new idea or a point;
- needs to contrast information or ideas;
- feels that the readers need a pause;
- is ending the introduction or starting the conclusion.

Paragraph Development

There are different methods of developing paragraphs. They are by –

1. Giving examples and illustrations.
2. Citing facts, statistics, evidence, details, and other data.
3. Examining testimony (what other people say, such as quotes and paraphrases)
4. Using an anecdote or a story.
5. Defining the terms in the paragraph.
6. Comparing and contrasting method.

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7. Evaluating causes and reasons.
 8. Examining effects and consequences.
 9. Analyzing the topic.
 10. Describing the topic.
 11. Giving a chronology of an event (time segments)

A Paradigm of a Paragraph plan

A paragraph should have a title. It should have a topic sentence at the beginning, support details in the middle and a conclusion at the end. This structure is considered to be a good one for two main reasons:

1. It helps the writer to stay focused by placing a topic sentence at the beginning, which serves as a guide for the writer to concentrate only on the topic.
2. It helps the reader to easily get the main idea at a glance when a paragraph is well constructed and well developed.

A Suggested Model of the Paragraph plan has been provided in Figure B1 of Appendix B.

What is the title of a paragraph?

A title is the name of a paragraph that should catch the attention of the readers.

What makes a good topic sentence?

A statement that limits the topic to a certain extent makes a good topic sentence. Limitations could be applied using statements pertaining to place, time, quality, similarity, difference, number/list, cause/reason, effect, etc.

Why are the details important?

Considering the example of the burger; the burger buns are the topic and concluding sentences, tomato, onion, cheese, peas, etc. are the supporting details. Without the food between the buns, the burger would not be delicious. Similarly, without the supporting details, paragraph would not be interesting.

What makes a good concluding statement?

A sentence that summarizes the information at the end of the paragraph is the concluding statement.

Literature Review

Al- Hazmi SH, Scholfield, P. (2007) in the article “Enforced Revision with checklist and Gaze feedback in EFL writing: The Example of Saudi University Students” have observed that the students are usually left alone in revising or marking drafts of their own works without any guidelines from their teachers. They do not follow up with the works of their students and check whether they have improved or not.

Arif Ahmed M.H. Al-Ahdal, Fahad S. Allfallaj, Salmeen A. Al-Awaied, Abdulghani A Al- Hattami (2014) conducted a study entitled “A Comparative Study of Proficiency in Speaking and Writing among EFL Learners in Saudi Arabia”. This study has witnessed the dichotomy between speaking and writing abilities of college level young learners. The trend has been towards a high score on writing tests as compared to the oral proficiency tests; a

major communicative drawback faced by the 'products' of this system of education. Many causes and remedies have been suggested.

Bista (2010) carried a survey and quoted that the students of a sample from different countries spoke with different accents and created a degree of non intelligibility and made them laugh at one another. One student said, "I speak English but my Korean friend does not understand me because of my accent. I also do not understand Chinese accent. I ask my Saudi friend before I reply to my professor. If we talk in Arabic first, and answer my professor, he says, very good."

Khan, I A. (2011) in the article "Learning Difficulties in English: Diagnosis and Pedagogy in Saudi Arabia" has given an exhaustive list of language areas in which the target language learners face difficulties. They are pronunciation, cluster of phonemes, transliteration of English words into Arabic, grammar, structure, doubling of subjects, tense, articles, capitalization and punctuation, double prepositions, confusion in number identification, problems in learning vocabulary/ meaning, synonyms, uses of synonyms, different uses of one word, prefixes, suffixes, spelling, silent letters, different sounds of one letter, different letters of one sound, etc. Some of the dissertations dealt with the Saudi acquisition of specific linguistic features of L2, such as morpheme acquisition order (Al- Afaleg, 1991), English Derivational morphology (Al- Qadi, 1992), Temporal

conjunctions (Noor, 1993), Tense and Aspect (Farraj, 1995) and second language Relative Clauses (Maghrabi,1997).

Materials and Methods

Analytical and descriptive methods have been used to analyze and describe the errors committed by undergraduate students of Jazan University in English paragraph writing. For this purpose, an English paragraph writing test has been administered to the sample of the study. The text book "Ready to Write 1: A First Composition Text", written by Karen Blanchard & Christine Root (2010) prescribed by Jazan University has been used as teaching material.

Participants of the Study

The participants comprised of 30 undergraduate students of Girls' Samtah campus, Jazan University. Their area of specialization was Sciences, but study of English was a part of their program.

Instruments for Data Collection Paragraph Writing Test:

A narrative paragraph has been given in the test paper. The test has been conducted on the spot to analyze the paragraph writing skills in English. The data, thus collected, was used for research purpose only. Please refer to the Paragraph writing test in Appendix A.

Validity of the test:

The test satisfied the 3 criteria – Content validity (the test items measured the concept), face validity (the test measured the writing skills, as the name suggests) and construct validity (the test tapped the concept as theorized).

Reliability of the test:

Test-retest method has been used to measure the consistency of the test. The scripts were evaluated by two teachers. The result of both the evaluations was in the same range. This showed that there was consistency/stability between the two measures by Teacher#1 and Teacher#2. The test scores indicated that the test is valid and reliable.

Procedure

The data collected by conducting a paragraph writing test has been analyzed. The dimensions – Topic sentence, supporting details and concluding statement of a paragraph have been taken into consideration to analyze the paragraph writing skills. Scores have been allocated to different components. The sum of the scores in different components has been taken as the total score of the paragraph writing skills exhibited by the respondents.

Discussion

Findings of the Study

1. A graphical representation of the test scores showing the number of students with their respective scores is provided in Figure B2 of Appendix B.
2. Table C1 of Appendix C shows the statistical analysis for the measures

of central tendency, Standard Deviation (SD) and Standard Error (SE).

Educational Implications of the Study

All English language instructors should develop self instructional material and improve the paragraph writing skills in English among the students. They are requested to take steps to diagnose the different kinds of errors committed by students, so as to improve their paragraph writing skills. Also, they should motivate the students in a way to create interest towards learning English and it should be a stress free environment. In-service training programs should be organized to improve the standards of teaching English among the existing English teachers at the school level. Orientation programs should be conducted to all the language instructors in the universities.

Conclusions of the Study

Majority of the sample (75%) did not possess the required paragraph writing skills in English. Most of the respondents did not have proper exposure towards the English language during their schooling. Lack of knowledge in English at the school level and overcrowded classes at university level are some of the reasons for not having the desired paragraph writing skills in English among the respondents. The students are less motivated and not interested in learning a foreign language like English.

Suggestions

The present study was an analysis of errors in narrative paragraph writing. In the same way studies could be done to analyze descriptive paragraph writing, expository and persuasive writing. Replication of the study could be done with different samples.

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