Paragraph Organization Errors in the Writing of Pakistani College-Going Students: An Error Analysis Study

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Abstract

Writing something worthy of reading in a foreign language is a challenging task. Students learning English as a foreign or a second language suffer most in writing especially in paragraph writing. Although studies have been conducted to explore language errors in English composition of Pakistani students, paragraph organization errors have received little attention. Therefore, this study investigated errors in the unity, development, and coherence in the paragraphs written by Pakistani college students. Besides, the study also explored the factors that cause errors in the paragraphs. In this regard, writing samples of purposively selected 20 college participants were analyzed using error analysis classification by Liu and Wang (2011). Thereafter, five participants were interviewed individually through semi-structured interviews to explore factors that cause errors in the paragraphs of college students. The findings revealed that the students made most errors in paragraph unity, followed by paragraph development, and then paragraph coherence. Besides, the thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that cramming culture, excessive attention given to grammar and lack of quality feedback were the key factors that had affected the paragraph organization skills of these students. The study discusses implications for students and teachers.

Keywords: college-going students, error analysis, paragraph organization, writing skills

INTRODUCTION

English is the most commonly spoken language in the world (Mauranen, 2003). It is used in various spheres of life ranging from business, commerce, and education to science and technology. English has transformed into a language of study and it is a vital means of communication and transfer of information, particularly in the field of education. English has emerged as a medium of study and the common source of significant information transfer (Mahboob, 2014). Bearing in mind its enormous significance around the world, it is highly supported in Pakistani academia too. Not only is English Pakistan’s official language, but it is also a medium of instruction across the country (Coleman, 2010; Mahboob, 2020). As the English language is widely used, pupils must be proficient in all four language aspects: reading and listening (input skills), writing and speaking (output skills). However, research shows that L2 students face a wide range of issues while learning a foreign language. Since the expression of thoughts in a well-planned and well-organized manner are indispensable, addressing writing challenges are of considerable importance (Korth et al., 2017).

Because writing is a useful skill that requires a significant amount of effort, it becomes a much more challenging task to write something in a foreign language or L2. Students, especially those who are learning English as a second language (henceforth ESL), have a tough time creating something that is worth reading. Likewise, Pakistani college students have difficulty learning the English language, particularly mastering the ability to write. Studies indicate that students in Pakistan at different levels make errors in significant areas such as spellings, tenses, sentence structures, punctuation marks, and paragraph structure (Fareed, et al., 2016; Javed, et al., 2013). Although there has been a lot of research in difficulties experienced by learners in learning the English language, paragraph organization has received very little attention, especially at the college level (Siddqui, 2020). Besides, students who have done their Matriculation from public sector education institutes, seem to struggle more in writing classes. So far, the researcher failed to locate any empirical studies that have been carried out in Pakistan to find the types of errors these students make in paragraph organization and what the reasons for college students’ problems with paragraph organization are.

This study aims to identify the paragraph organization errors made by college-going students and to investigate the factors causing such errors in paragraph organization. The research questions that emerged for the study were:

Research Questions

• What errors in paragraph organization do students make in Pakistani colleges?
• What factors cause these errors in the students’ writing samples?

Significance of the Study

The study findings will be advantageous for the students, teachers, and program designers in their own ways. Students would be more conscious of their flaws in writing a paragraph, which would prevent them from repeating the mistakes in the future. The study will inform teachers of the regular forms and frequency
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LITERATURE REVIEW

Paragraph Development

Paragraph structure is probably the most important thing to discuss when it comes to the structure and arrangement of a document (Wali & Madani, 2020). Collection of words and phrases make sentences; combination of sentences make paragraphs in different genres of writing like letters, reports, essays, and other longer work of composition (Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008). Therefore, in any text, the value of paragraphs is important. A paragraph is made up of a topic sentence followed by supporting details, and ending with a concluding or closing sentence (Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008); and only one idea must be dealt with in each paragraph (Saeed, et al., 2021). A topic sentence is a sentence that usually takes the first place in a paragraph, stating the main idea of the whole paragraph, followed by supporting ideas that give information about or explain the core theme. A paragraph ends with a closing sentence, which either restates the topic sentence or presents a short summary of the entire paragraph or includes a blend of both (Kemper, et al., 2018).

Error Analysis (EA) and its Importance

Despite several criticisms, such as disagreements over what constitutes a mistake, definition of an error and the ways to recognize errors and error analysis (EA) continues to be a perfect tool for investigating errors made by learners (Wu & Garza, 2014). Countless researchers have tried to define error in the past years. For example, Corder (1967) characterizes an error as a code breach, or a departure from the norm; James (2013) interprets error as an unsuccessful language; Lennon (1991) considers an error to be a linguistic form or a mixture of forms that the speaker’s native speaker counterparts would not produce in the same sense and under similar production conditions. What is popular with these meanings is the obvious difference that they all refer to errors as linguistic deviations. To match certain study objectives, researchers have experimented with a broader definition of a mistake.

Zhang, et al., (1995), for example, discovered both linguistic and rhetorical faults encompassing not only grammar, but also discourse concerns in their study. Error analysis is a kind of technique to evaluate the speech or written output of second/foreign language learners. From various viewpoints, several researchers have already addressed error analysis. Both Corder (1967) and Brown (2000) emphasize the importance of language learner errors in research because it reveals the learners’ current level of knowledge. According to Corder (1967), studying errors is not only something to be avoided, but it can also be beneficial in and of itself. Corder (1967) noted that the mistakes of students should not be overlooked because these are those mistakes that establish functions for language learners. As some researchers have pointed out (Corder, 1967; Dai & Shu, 1994), error analysis in the following aspects is highly important for second language acquisition.

Error Analysis and Paragraph Writing

Numerous research studies have been conducted since the 1970s to define and categorize errors at different stages of writing, like, the sentence, paragraph, and discourse stages. At the Chinese University in Beijing, Liu and Wang (2011) identified mistakes and looked at how they (the mistakes) related to the writing that students produced over time in the target language. Data from 90 compositions generated as the result of three tasks delivered to 30 Chinese undergraduate non-English majors over an eight week period were evaluated to investigate errors at the paragraph level amongst four categories: paragraph unity, paragraph growth, paragraph coherence, and point of view inconsistency. The findings indicated that 105 paragraph-level faults were found out of 1138 reported errors in 90 compositions (9 percent). The most frequent problems at the paragraph level according to the researchers were point of view inconsistency (11%), errors in paragraph development (43 %), errors in paragraph coherence (28 %), and errors in paragraph unity (18 %).

Having evaluated paragraph-writing samples of 70 students at Bushehr University of Applied Science and Technology (Shahhoseiny, 2015) discovered 165 mistakes in total. Fifty-eight errors were identified in the subject sentence, which accounted for 81.6 %, 97.2% for 69 errors in supporting sentences, and 53.5% for 38 errors in the closing sentences. Furthermore, ANOVA one-way analysis of these errors in paragraph writing revealed interesting findings. There were no statistically significant differences in the frequency of errors between the topic sentence and the supporting or ending sentences, whereas the number of errors between
the supporting and concluding sentences was bearable.

In the Iranian context, Khansir and Ahrami (2014) firstly taught students at Bushehr University of Medical Sciences and Health Services how to write a paragraph. Then, they did a comparison of results of 90 paragraphs written in pre-test and post-test experiment. The statistical tests revealed that students made 81 errors in paragraph writing in the post-test compared to 209 errors in the pre-test, indicating that students would produce better write-ups if the nuances of paragraph writing are taught to them earlier. This study specifically ranked paragraphs in four types, based on the quantity and percentage of errors in each category. In the end, there were 63 errors in supporting data in the pre-test and only 28 in the post-test. The errors in closing sentence were 54 in the pre-test and 22 in the post-test. This was followed by 47 errors in topic sentences in the pre-test and 15 in the post-test. As for supporting sentences, errors committed in the pre-test were 45 and 16 in the post-test.

The above studies investigated the errors of EFL students in a paragraph’s sentence structure and organization of ideas. Furthermore, the studies investigated the relationship between numerous variables like learners’ skills, paragraph writing instructions, various writing tasks and longitudinal influences, and errors made when writing a paragraph. Since English is taught in Pakistan as a foreign language, students’ paragraphs are far from perfect because of the difficulties college students face in writing. Moreover, no study on error analysis in paragraph organization has been conducted in the context of Pakistan, particularly Sukkur. Therefore, this study seeks to identify the paragraph organization errors made by college students and to investigate the factors causing such errors in college students’ paragraph organization.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The participants comprised 20 college students between the age of 16 and 20 (ten male and ten female). All of them spoke Sindhi as their first language. These participants were selected at the start of the course using purposive sampling technique as it enables the researcher to extract rich information from the participants (Etikan, et al., 2016).

Writing Samples

The written paragraphs of 20 college students learning English in their second-year program at a public sector college are the corpus examined for data collection for this study. In their writing lesson, students were assigned to compose a paragraph on a given topic. The choice of topic was based on the general and familiar nature of the subjects so that the students could express their ideas freely and easily. Participants were invited to write on the following topic: My first day in college. The writing samples of the study participants were the first approach used to determine how the topic sentence was created, how it was supported with supporting elements, and how it was concluded. The documentary evidence refers to “systematic gathering of data” (Bretschneider, et al., 2017) thus, enabling the researcher to view and identify the areas of frequently made errors.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Another tool to gather data for this study was the semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is a data collection strategy that allows researchers to interview participants by asking preset questions, and it allows individuals to freely express the issues that are most important to them (Galletta, 2013). This tool helped to gain the perspectives of the participants pertaining to the factors that influence their errors in paragraph organization. This approach was also employed to acquire a holistic understanding of the participants’ issues. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide that included questions regarding students’ perspectives about influencing factors.

Data Collection Procedure

A writing assignment involving paragraph writing was administered to the participants to collect the data. In week 02 of the academic calendar, a sheet with the topic was handed over to the participants. They had 30-40 minutes to produce a paragraph of 120 to 150 words on the given topic. For data analysis of the writing samples, the current study used classification by Liu and Wang (2011), which states the following:

Errors in Unity of Paragraph

The errors belonging to this category are related to students’ inability to demonstrate a clear controlling idea or the presence of many controlling ideas, and the presence of the topic sentence which does not encompass all the ideas mentioned in the paragraph.
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**Errors in Development of Paragraph**

The errors belonging to this category are caused by students’ failure to provide adequate clarification or support for the topic sentence, and to provide correct details or related information necessary to expand on the topic.

**Errors in Coherence of Paragraph**

The errors belonging to this category are caused by an inefficient or illogical arrangement of concepts in a paragraph and/or the failure to create connection between ideas using proper connecting devices.

**RESULTS & FINDINGS**

**Errors in Paragraphs**

Despite the fact that written work, particularly composing paragraphs has long been part of the English curriculum, students continue to make mistakes, particularly when it comes to structuring their thoughts in a paragraph. Twenty students were given a topic and asked to write a paragraph on it. The manuscripts of these 20 students were then reviewed in the light of the topic sentence, supporting thoughts, and closing sentences, which are the three components of a paragraph.

**Topic Sentences Lack Controlling Ideas**

Usually, the first sentence of a paragraph, which is the topic sentence, conveys the paragraph’s main point. The writings of the students were evaluated and it became apparent that they were not aware of it. They were unable to open with a sentence that both introduced the subject and the writer’s viewpoint on it. Below are a few examples of topic sentences taken from the participants’ papers.

- My history is in college and public schools.
- I was thinking about how the university world was going to be as I passed my intermediate.
- That was terrible but really not a lot.
- When I went to college, I was shocked.

**Supporting Ideas are Inadequate**

The lack of a strong paragraph introduction resulted in the students’ failure to provide clear, well-organized and connected statements to support the corresponding topic sentences. Rather than establishing the already-mentioned concept, they provided extra and irrelevant material in the paragraphs. The excessive usage of and, also, so then can be seen in the long sentences. Furthermore, their inability to generate well-organized and related paragraphs is demonstrated by their lack of or insufficient use of appropriate transitional phrases. According to one of the samples:

> "I meet Sana, who seems to be my roommate and a student in my class. After visiting the seniors, we head to the cafeteria for some juice and then to the hostel".

[Errors in spellings have been reproduced as they were in the students’ manuscripts]

**Paragraphs Conclude Abruptly**

There was no acceptable closing point for the majority of the written work of the students. The last content in the list abruptly ended, or the concluding phrases were more generic or strayed from the beginning of the paragraph or its subject. Again, there were no transitional words used to signify the end of the paragraph.

- He encourages us to read and learn.
- I met several people who, like me, were excited and anxious, and I was unable to make many friends.
- Different locations provide information about different sites.
- After a few minutes, a youngster named Vikran approached me and inquired about my name, to which I replied that I was from India.

**Factors Causing Errors in Students’ Writing**

Five participants were interviewed: two females and three males. After seeking the participants’ consent, the interviews were performed and recorded. The following themes were uncovered by thematic review of the interview results.
Cramming of Written Material

Students reported that in their years at school, teachers asked students to replicate the material posted or written on the blackboard. During tests, students were merely asked to cram and repeat passages or essays. A student responded:

“Teachers would ask us to copy the text from the (black) board then we were asked to learn the paragraphs by heart.”

Another student claimed:

“In tests, we got those topics of essays which we had already done in class, so we remembered from the notes at the time of tests or exams.”

Another student opined:

“We wrote the learnt paragraphs just to pass the tests in the class.”

Excessive Attention to Grammar

Another theme that arose from the transcripts was that grammatical corrections were emphasized by their previous teachers. Directing students to write something of their own and organizing of ideas were completely ignored. One respondent stated:

“We had been granted some freedom to write on our own identified topic and we were encouraged to create something that we could possess. My English teacher was young and fresh out of university, which likely set this case apart from others.”

They complained that the teachers would make their copies red due to grammatical errors. This suggests that the educators paid little attention to structuring their thoughts in a paraphrased format, rather focusing on grammatical corrections.

Lack of Quality Feedback

According to the above findings, the students were not required to explore their thoughts to write a paragraph, but were instead asked to copy texts from the boards. This eliminates the actual feedback portion of the writing process. However, few of the students’ ideas showed that while teachers were frequently prepared to provide input, reaching out to all pupils in class was extremely difficult due to overcrowding. A student very confidently proclaimed:

“We were backbenchers so when the instructor reached us for checking our work, the bell rang and he would leave for his next class.”

This suggests that the teachers taught large classes and checking individual work in 60 minutes was next to impossible.

Another participant stated:

“We could hardly get any written feedback whether we went to the teachers’ office or the staff room. The instructor would check our work half-heartedly and pretend they were busy.”

Discussion

According to the findings of this study, the participants were learning English as a foreign language, and were found to be inefficient in coping with the norms of producing a well-organized paragraph in English. The study aligns with (Hammad, 2012), who believes that lack of exposure to English input is one of the most important reasons for making mistakes in writing. In Saudi Arabian schools and institutions, English is taught as a foreign language. Because the majority of Saudi students do not live in an environment that encourages them to utilize English, they are more likely to forget the rules. This is in line with Latif (2007), who believes that the fundamental reason of writing errors is lack of knowledge of a foreign language’s structure.

According to Al-Khasawneh (2014), paragraph writing in EFL is challenging due to linguistic interference and poor mother tongue transfer. In addition, ineffective methods and strategies for teaching paragraph writing also contribute to various problems in paragraph writing, particularly those that were tied at the paragraph level, including paragraph development (AlTameemy & Daradkeh, 2019). Some teachers choose to teach grammatical rules by using traditional methods that rely on recurrence and utilize language in distinct phrases, rather than using communicative approach that encourages students to interact with grammar. This method of teaching grammatical rules allows students to write simple statements, but it is insufficient for
compound and complex phrases (Schleppegrell, 2003). Resultantly, guidelines for producing a well-structured paragraph are ignored by these lecturers.

The methods for teaching pupils to write a paragraph should provide adequate time to encourage them to think freely and generate suggestions for the topic (Wu & Garza, 2014). Following that, they should be taught how to organize their thoughts in a logical and effective manner. Additionally, instructors should teach students how to come up with a clear controlling idea focusing one thing in a paragraph. They should provide students pertinent ideas to expand on the subject and teach them how to change tenses and grammatical structures correctly within a paragraph. According to earlier research by Liu and Wang (2011), the errors were mostly found in paragraph development and lesser in paragraph coherence and paragraph unity. In fact, a few students provided correct topic sentences, but were unable to expand on them or support them with additional ideas, facts, or examples.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The study findings will have some educational implications. For starters, making mistakes is a regular part of the language development process, thus students’ mistakes can be a valuable resource for improving teaching and learning. Students should not be labelled by their teachers based on their writing faults. Teachers should appreciate students’ efforts and encourage them to write for varied purposes in order to learn language in a variety of situations. In the classroom, authentic sources such as newspapers, journals, websites, and printed reading materials can be used. We believe that encouraging future instructors and students through positive corrective feedback, real target language input, and interactive teaching and learning can help them improve their language abilities by triggering their motivation and awareness.

**Competing Interest**

The authors have declared no competing interest.

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