Exploring EFL Learners' Difficulties in Academic Writing: Problems and Solutions

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Article Info

Abstract

For EFL students at universities, writing an effective paragraph is essential to their academic and eventual professional success. To teach and learn this skill, though, is never easy for either the teacher or the student. This study aims to uncover the challenges that EFL Indonesian university students have while writing an effective paragraph and to propose solutions to those challenges. A qualitative approach to data collecting and analysis was used to accomplish the research objectives, and data was gathered through the paragraph writing exam, questionnaire, and classroom observations. The examination of the students' paragraph writing found that the crucial difficulties encountered by the students in writing a well-developed paragraph were developing the topic phrase (70%), as well as focusing and organizing their thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is often acknowledged to be the most difficult and last of English skills to master. Writing in another language needs not only mastery of its vocabulary and grammar, but also understanding of how native speakers of that language organize their thoughts. As a result, in order to write successfully, students must follow the approved pattern of structure. The complexity of the writing skill may be the cause of one's inability to write. In order to better themselves and assist students in solving their problems, it is necessary for teachers to look into any potential challenges that their pupils may encounter. According to Nunan (1998), the most difficult challenge in language learning is producing a cohesive, fluent, extended piece of writing, which is significantly more difficult for second language learners. Many studies have been undertaken

to study the difficulties and solutions for both ESL and EFL students learning to write. However, many students still struggle when asked to write a piece of academic writing. As a result, the research described in this article aims to answer the following queries:

(1) What challenges do EFL students frequently face when trying to write an effective paragraph?

(2) What are the causes of these issues, and what remedies, methods, or strategies can be used to deal with them?

Overview of Research in Writing Difficulties

Essay and paragraph writing challenges among students have been extensively explored and studied. Ali Muhammed (2015) did a study and found that the two main writing issues for Kurdish EFL learners are irrelevant controlling ideas and support, repetition and redundancy, and a lack of description. According to the findings of a related study by Rass, Palestinian Arab students have difficulties composing paragraphs that have a strong topic sentence and a strong conclusion, provide evidence for their points using examples and justifications, and use proper discourse markers. Another related study by

Ibnian found that Jordanian EFL students' top writing class challenges were lack of ideas, followed by improper mechanics of writing, inappropriate topics, a dearth of resources for consultation, grammatical issues, and a lack of teacher assistance (Ibnian, 2017). While the study by Belkhir and Benyalles found that EFL students at Tlemcen University had problems with coherence and cohesion as a result of a lack of reading, a poor transfer of their native tongue, and little writing practice (Belkhir & Benyelles, 2017). Previous research has shown that problems with academic writing are caused by linguistic deficiencies, a lack of writing experience, and students' native language transfer.

Similarly, Indonesian EFL university students also suffered with essay writing syntax, cohesion, coherence, paragraph organization, diction, and spelling issues (Ariyanti and Fitriana, 2017). Hasan and Marzuki (2017) also investigated the English writing abilities of Riau university students by providing them writing tasks to complete in a given period of time. Their findings highlighted grammatical difficulties in the pupils' work concerning plural forms, articles, verb forms, clauses, passive voice, and prepositions. In a

similar vein, Toba, Noor, and Sanu (2019) claim that Indonesian EFL university students still have difficulty with writing elements like content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. Their reasons for having these issues included not only a lack of understanding of the comparison and contrast essay itself and its components, but also individual factors like a lack of writing experience, a dislike of writing, a negative perception of writing, a lack of writing motivation, a lack of time allotted for writing tests, and a lack of teaching about the writing process from their teachers.

Paragraph Writing and Writing Process

The ability to compose an effective paragraph is critical for EFL students in university in order to thrive academically and in their future careers. However, teaching and mastering this talent is always difficult for both the instructor and the learner. The ability to create excellent paragraphs is highly valued, especially for advanced students, because the majority of the writing they will be asked to perform in college is in the form of paragraphs. To produce an effective paragraph, students must not only grasp the paragraph and its

features, but also utilize those elements in their writing.

A paragraph is a sequence of related sentences that grow around a single theme (Auerbach, Barbara, & Snyder, 1983; Bram, 1995; Blanchard & Christine, 2004; Oshima & Hogue, 1997). A paragraph is made up of three key structural components: (1) topic sentence: it is the main idea of the paragraph; it names the topic and limits the topic to one or two areas that can be discussed completely in a single paragraph; (2) supporting sentences are sentences that develop the main idea by providing reasons, facts, examples, or quotations to prove the main idea stated in the topic sentence; and (3) a concluding sentence, which is optional. A good paragraph also includes the elements of unity, which means that you discuss only one important topic in a paragraph, and coherence, which implies that you explore only one main theme in a paragraph.

Langan (2010) stated that to write a good paragraph, you should start with a point, then support that argument with specific facts, and then end your paper with a sentence that closes out the paragraph and provides a sense of completion. A well-organized paragraph has three

characteristics: (1) unified, which means that all of its sentences are related to one main idea; (2) coherent, which means that the thoughts flow logically from sentence to sentence; and (3) developed, which means that the paragraph contains enough information to convey the paragraph's idea in a reasonably thorough manner (Raimes, & Jerskey, 2011; Yarber & Yarber, 2010).

To create a decent piece of writing, one must follow the phases in the writing process. In Celce Murcia (2001), Kroll describes process writing or process approach as the process by which student writers engage in their writing duties in a cyclical rather than a one-shot manner. They are not expected to compose and submit complete and polished responses to their writing tasks without first going through phases of drafting and obtaining feedback on their drafts, whether from peers or the teacher, followed by modification of their evolving texts (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Thus, in the process writing, learners are regarded as important to learning, with their requirements, expectations, objectives, learning styles, abilities, and knowledge taken into account. Learners must make the most of their

strengths, such as knowledge and skills, during the writing process by employing the necessary aid and cooperation of the teacher and the other learners. It helps learners to feel free to express their own thoughts or feelings in written messages by giving them plenty of time and opportunity to review and modify their writing and seek support from outside resources such as the instructor at each step.

Essentially, the process approach focuses on the act of writing, which includes developing ideas, selecting which concepts are essential to the message, and then communicating that message using the language available in a process that grows as it progresses. According to Harmer, the writing process is "the stages a writer goes through in order to produce something in its final written form." He continues, "the process of writing is recursive" (Harmer, 2007). He means that the authors here plan, draft, and edit, then frequently re-plan, re-draft, and re-edit. As a result, he claims that if the phases differ in number, they must be non-linear. Also, because it is recursive, the writer can move forwards and backwards at any point during the writing process.

The process approach highlighted the necessity of improving

students' capacity to plan, recognize challenges, analyze potential solutions, and implement them (Hyland, 2003). Teachers who use the process approach encourage students to be self-aware and to reflect on the actions and tactics they use when writing (Hyland, 2003). The writing process is viewed as a non-linear, exploratory, and creative process in which writers discover and reformulate their ideas while attempting to approach meaning (Silva in Kroll, 1990). The process approach taught students to polish and fix their writing through a number of phases rather than relying on a single draft (Raimes, 1983). Teachers who use this technique are no longer authorities or evaluators; instead, they are facilitators and supporters who can intervene and provide help by providing feedback. Brown encourages teachers to provide feedback to students with explicit revision recommendations "through self-correction, peer-correction, and instructor-initiated comments" (Brown, 2001).

Hyland and Hyland (2006) define feedback as a social act that influences communication factors such as context, participants, objective, and medium. Furthermore, feedback benefits both language education and writing skill development by offering clear, well-structured ideas, accuracy, and meaningful paragraphs (Hyland, 2003). Giving correction through feedback can boost a student's confidence, self-awareness, and excitement for studying.

Brown also provides some rules for teachers to follow when providing feedback on students' initial drafts. Teachers should address important content-related faults within relevant paragraphs rather than minor grammatical errors, and they should comment on the overall thesis and structural arrangement. Furthermore, teachers can identify uncomfortable word choices and expressions and make suggestions for improved word choices and expressions (Brown, 2001). To summarize, in order to provide effective feedback on students' first drafts, teachers should respond to the first drafts with an emphasis on the overall meaning of the writing. Above all, teachers should avoid rewriting a student's phrases. Instead, teachers can ask students about the meaning of a specific statement or make ideas to help students express themselves properly.

METHODS

The research was conducted at a state university in Serang Banten, Indonesia. In this case, English is studied in an EFL context. This study included 40 students (34 females and 6 men) from the second semester who were enrolled in the 'Paragraph Based Writing' course. The study used a qualitative data collecting and analysis approach (Miles, Matthew B., & Huberman, 1984). To answer the study's questions, a random sample of 20 students' paragraphs were selected from the results of their writing test. In the following meeting, the students were handed a questionnaire composed of five open-ended questions designed to investigate the students' writing challenges. Then, classroom observations were carried out to determine the nature of the teaching and learning process. The data was then examined and presented using thematic criteria for constructing an effective paragraph based on the data gathered.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study was carried out to analyze Indonesian EFL learners' difficulties in producing an affective paragraph and to discover a solution to such difficulties. Students were given a questionnaire to evaluate their challenges in producing an effective paragraph, and 20 samples of their writing tests were analyzed. Classroom observations were also undertaken to observe the nature of the teaching and learning process and to analyze the elements that cause difficulty.

EFL Learners' Difficulties in Writing Effective Paragraph

The paragraph writing task required students to compose an opinion paragraph on one of three topics (smartphone, part-time employment, or overseas travel). Eight students wrote about smartphones, nine students wrote about having a part-time job, and three students wrote about overseas trips). The issues discovered in this study were analyzed using the criteria for producing an effective paragraph. They are as follows: the existence of a point mentioned in the topic sentence, the topic supports /topic development (cohesion), and the systematic structuring of ideas (coherence).

Several issues were discovered as a result of analyzing the 20 paragraphs of students' writing tests:

1. 70% of pupils struggle with writing or constructing their topic phrase. They composed a

topic sentence that had the point/main concept but was nonetheless vague or in the form of a complex sentence. This broad concept, of course, cannot be covered in a single paragraph. A subject phrase, according to Oshima and Hogue, states the core idea of a paragraph; it names the topic of the paragraph and limits the topic to one or two regions that can be explored completely in a single paragraph. However, the majority of students in this study submitted a topic sentence with a general notion (25%) or a complex sentence as the topic sentence that needed to be recast (45%).

2. 95% of them were unable to focus their work. Students were unable to develop their point or key concept due to a lack of sufficient support/topic development. The majority of them merely wrote basic thoughts, and only half of those ideas (65%) were relevant to the topic sentence. Furthermore, 40% of them attempt to develop their topic support by elaborating on those concepts. The remaining 30% of students

advanced their case by providing extraneous thoughts that did not help their point. Because of these issues, the pupils' paragraph lacked cohesiveness.

3. 95% of pupils struggle to organize their ideas. Some sentences were written repeatedly and lacked specific specifics. Furthermore, most students did not employ connectors to indicate the relationship of each idea in their paragraph, resulting in a lack of coherency.

The following are examples and the analytical results of students' paragraphs:

Student-1: (1) In this era, smartphone is very important. (2) Many people says a smartphone can be an educational tools. (3) From smartphone we can get many information and many things. (4) I think why every people using a smartphone as an educational tools? It is because smartphone give many advantage. (5) From internet, smartphone get a good signal. we get many information from that. (6) for the quality, smartphone have a good model and the system is so fast. (7) I think smartphone it is good

for all of people in this era. We have to take advantage from that. (8) I think smartphone bring us to think smart. (9) We should use the smartphone carefully. (10) Use the smartphone for positive things, because if we use smartphone for negative things it can destroy our think. (11) So, we have to take care our smartphone don't use our smartphone for negative things but use for positive things.

The topic of the preceding paragraph is Smartphone. However, finding the actual topic sentence was difficult because the paragraph contained many ideas such as very important, an educational tool, get many information and many things, give many advantages, good model and the system is so fast, think smart, use smartphone carefully, and use for positive things without providing any specific details. The student simply discussed smartphones in general, without narrowing his/her presentation to a specific topic. Aside from some phrase repetition, the paragraph finished with a conclusion statement that did not match with the issue. This suggests that the student was unable to focus his/her discussion, develop the subject with suitable details/information, or arrange his/her ideas.

The paragraph below demonstrates another issue in producing a good paragraph:

Students-2: (1) Many college students have a part time job, it can be waitress, chef, or something else. (2) They have part time job for add their money and fill their break time. (3) But some people who have part time job might be thinking it is not only about money, it is about experience. (4) They want to have experience about part time job and they want to have more friends on their works place. (5) Some college students will thinks that have a part time job is not good because it is tiring and wasting time. (6) For me have a part time job is good because you can have experience about part time job and you will have more friends. (7) But if you have part time job you must manage your time. (8) Do not lately do your tasks from your lecture, finish it first and then you can go to your work place. (9) And you must have enough time to sleep so you will not feel sleepy in the class. (10) If you cannot manage your time, your tasks and your time for sleep will messed up. (11) If your time for sleep is messed up, it is not good for your health. (12) So, if you cannot manage your time, you better not have a part time job.

This student, like the previous, created an unfocused paragraph with no topic sentence. However, the student attempted to provide support for some of the concepts presented in his paragraph. Halfway through his paragraph, he had concentrated and matured. This paragraph was likewise concluded with a finishing sentence that barely fit a few of the last lines in his paragraph. According to the paragraph above, the student also struggled with emphasizing his topic sentence, providing topic supports, and organizing the concepts in his paragraph.

Source of difficulties and the solution

Three times observation revealed that the Writing class was still conducted in the traditional manner, with students carefully listening to the teacher's explanation and only delivering questions related to technical writing, such as whether they could use pencil or not, or whether they had to write on their book or folio paper. The pupils were then required to compose a paragraph on their own, imitating the model of a paragraph that was projected through in focus. The majority of the time, students used a friend who was sitting next to them or their cell phone to discuss their thoughts and problems and seek solutions. When they couldn't think of any suitable words, they turned to their teacher. After two weeks, the finished product was submitted and returned. The majority of the comments made referred to sentence level issues, such as inappropriate verb usage, diction, grammar, and capitalization.

Based on the issues described above, it can be stated that students' challenges in producing a quality paragraph of writing are caused by the unsuitable teaching methodology used, the lack of a writing process, the lack of direction, and the lack of feedback. Therefore, it is advised that the instructor create an action plan to enhance student learning and writing quality by altering her approach and teaching methodology. Since it may help students with a variety of learning activities and give them direction and enough feedback so that the students can enhance the quality of their paragraph writing, it is advised for the instructor to employ process approach and feedback as her teaching technique.

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