

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



SHENDI UNIVERSITY



Investigating EFL Learners' Paragraph Writing at Tertiary Level

*(A case study of semester3 Students - Faculty of Arts - Shendi University -
Sudan)*

BY

HASSAN MERGANI M. AIDAROOS (PhD)

Assistant Prof. (Shendi University)

Investigating EFL Learners' Paragraph Writing at Tertiary Level

1.1 Abstract

In this study the researcher takes the students of semester three at the Faculty of Arts who study English as a foreign language at the University of Shendi as a sample to carry out this study. The study attempts to investigate and identify the problems facing them in writing a paragraph, to identify the actual reasons behind these problems, and to suggest suitable remedial procedures. A test of writing a paragraph was given to **48** students who represent the whole class of semester three at the faculty of Arts.

The test results were analyzed by using (SPSS). The results revealed by the test affirm that the students were very weak in writing skills. They failed to follow the steps and the criteria required for writing a well-structured paragraph.

Considering the findings of the study, and in order to participate in solving the students' weakness in writing skills, the researcher recommends and suggests the following:

- More consideration should be given to writing skill.
- Motivating students and raise their awareness of writing skills.
- Curriculum should include enough writing skills courses.
- More writing activities should be given to students.

خلاصة

في هذه الدراسة قام الباحث بأخذ طلاب الفصل الدراسي الثالث بكلية الآداب قسم اللغة الانجليزية بجامعة شندي كعينة للتعرف والتحقق من الصعوبات التي تواجههم في مهارة كتابة فقرة في اللغة الانجليزية وكذلك معرفة الأسباب الحقيقية وراء هذه الصعوبات و اقتراح حلول مناسبة.

قام الباحث بإعطاء أمتحان لعدد 48 طالبا من الطلاب المعنيين بالدراسة و هم كل طلاب الفصل الدراسي الثالث و ذلك بكتابة فقرة باللغة الانجليزية

تم تحليل البيانات الخاصة بأداء الطلاب في الامتحان بواسطة نظام (SPSS) الإحصائي.

أثبتت النتائج المستخلصة من الامتحان الخاص بالطلاب ضعف الطلاب الشديد في مهارات الكتابة في اللغة الانجليزية وذلك لفشلهم في تتبع الخطوات و الشروط اللازمة لكتابة الفقرة.

و بناءً على النتائج المستخلصة من الدراسة و مساهمة من الباحث في حل مشكلة ضعف الطلاب في مهارات الكتابة كانت محاور توصياته على النحو التالي:-

- اعطاء مهارة الكتابة الالهية في العملية التدريسية
- رفع الوعي لدى الطلاب بأهمية مهارات الكتابة
- تضمين مقررات اللغة الانجليزية مقررات كافية عن مهارات الكتابة

1.2 Key concepts

(Paragraph, topic sentence, developing, coherence and unity)

1.3 Background

There is a general consensus among educators that writing is a multi-faceted process because it involves other sub- skills. Liz Hamp and Lyons Ben Heasley highlight this point saying that “Writing is clearly a complex process, and competent writing is frequently accepted as being the last language skill to be acquired (for native speakers of the language as well as for foreign / second language learners)” (1987, p 2). In Sudan, the students of English, as a foreign language, face many difficulties in writing as a process as well as a product. For them it is one of the most problematic skills. There is a big gap between the standard of the English language of the students and what is required in the courses when they first enter the tertiary level. So writing as a productive skill reflects what the students know about English as a foreign language.

The Arabic alphabet is different from the English one. The former belongs to the Arabic alphabet while the latter belongs to the Latin one. The Arabic letters are written from right to left while the English ones are written from left to right.

As for gender, the English language does not differentiate between masculine and feminine when using the pronouns (you) and (they); moreover the pronoun (you) may

be used with both singular and plural. In Arabic we have a singular, dual and plural forms of nouns and pronouns but in English only two forms exist; that is to say singular and plural (more than one is considered plural in English). In Arabic the verb precedes the noun but in English it comes after the noun. In Arabic the adjective comes after the noun while in English it comes before the noun e.g. (new books). Tenses in Arabic are three only; that is to say present, past and future while in English they there are twelve

All these factors have got their impact on the standard of the Sudanese learners of (EFL) and all its aspects: listening, reading, speaking and writing.

1.4 Statement of the problem

This study has been conducted because there is a growing concern about the falling standards of writing skills among the students of English as a foreign language. The staff- members in the Department of English Language at Shendi University have often expressed their concern about the students' achievement and their level of English. As a teacher of English language at tertiary level, the researcher comes to the fact that the students' standard in writing is very weak. The background of the students about English is unknown to their teachers as they firstly enter the university.

"Writing is a very important part of your university study. You will write assignments that may range from one paragraph to several pages long, and will write answers on tests and exams that may be a few sentences long or a complete essay." (Rumisek 2005: v) This study tests and examines the ability of the students in writing paragraph as well as highlighting the areas of weaknesses,

1.5 Aims of the study

This study attempts to investigate and identify the actual reasons behind the problems facing the students of English language in writing a meaningful and well –

structured paragraph. The study will attempt to examine and verify this problem and eventually recommend ways of remedial work.

1.6 Significance of the study

The study is of great value to English language teachers, planners and designers of English language syllabus, learners of English as a foreign language, and the researchers in the area of English language teaching.

1.7 Methods of the study

The researcher adopts the descriptive analytical method. A test of writing a paragraph will be given to the students with the aim of collecting the data for the study. The SPSS will be used for data analysis.

1.8 Limits of the study

The study populations are the students of English as a second language at tertiary level, while the sample is limited to **semester three students** of the academic year 2014 – 2015 of English as a second language who study at Shendi University, Faculty of Arts. The study is limited to writing paragraph.

2. What is writing?

Writing is the translation of thoughts into visible symbols on papers. It is an essential communication method that is necessary in personal and public relationships and almost in every profession. “Writing is the process by which thoughts are translated into words and words are fashioned into sentences and paragraphs, poems and compositions.”(Gephardt & Rodriguez: w y: 14)

Writing is a representation of an unseen mental idea to seen symbols.

“We can define writing as the symbolic representation of language through the use of graphic signs.” (Yule 2006:212)

3. The paragraph

A paragraph is a group of related sentences about one topic. A paragraph should contain a topic sentences, development, unity, concluding sentence and coherence. A paragraph should always have complete, correct, and concise sentences. As well it should be easy to read and well organized. The paragraph itself should focus on one subject, theme, or central idea.

“A paragraph is a group of sentences about a single topic. Together, the sentences of a paragraph explain the writer main idea (most important idea) about the topic.”
(Rumisek 2005: 11)

“A paragraph is a series of sentences that develop one idea”
(Reid: 1988: 8)

3.1 The Structure of the Paragraph

An effective, meaningful and well structured paragraph should contain a topic sentence, adequate development, unity and coherence.

1. The topic sentences

The topic sentence conveys the main idea of the paragraph and it is usually the first and the most general sentence in it. But it can be the second when the first is used as kind of introduction.

The topic sentence is the most important sentence in the paragraph. It is the most general sentence that introduces the topic.

There is normally only one idea in each paragraph and this is expressed in a topic sentence. The other sentences support and expand on the idea in the topic sentence in different ways. The last sentence can often be important too, as it can be used to summarize the gist of the paragraph. (Treacher et al 2000: 7)

A simple statement of fact cannot be used as a topic sentence because in a fact there is no controlling idea that can be developed. The sentence (I like football better than tennis) is a weak topic sentence because it is a simple statement of opinion.

“A successful topic sentence usually contains an opinion that will be proved or supported in the paragraph, or a statement of intent that the writer will explain in detail in the paragraph.” (Reid: 1988: 11)

2. Developing sentences

After choosing a topic and writing a topic sentence, writers should develop and support their main idea by giving details and more information about it.

“These are sentences that talk about or explain the topic sentence. They are more detailed ideas that follow the topic sentence”. (Rumisek 2005: 12)

A paragraph could be developed with many methods e.g.by using examples, illustrations, facts, statistics, evidences, comparison, contrast, evaluation, reasons or description.

The illustration sentences in a paragraph develop the central idea by providing additional detailed information about it. When a paragraph is not developed effectively, readers may misunderstand or reject the writer’s central idea.

"In writing the paragraph, be careful to develop the topic sentence, not just the title. All the sentences in the paragraph should give details about the topic sentence and should give your reader a better understanding of the subject you are writing about than the topic sentence alone dose" (Idrees &Hago2:2006:105)

The sentences that you select to support the topic sentence of your paragraph depend on:

- *The audience
- *The purpose of the paragraph
- *Which technique would best support the topic sentence?
- *Which technique would best convince the audience that the topic sentence is valid?

2.1 Methods for developing a paragraph

2.1.1 Descriptive details (*physical description*)

Writers use specific, descriptive details to create images of people, scenes, and events. The five senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch – offer writers a source of detail about the world around them. Sensory details are often used to describe the look, sound, feel, taste, or smell of something e.g.

*Sight: round, square, flat, red, blue, yellow, green

*Sound: clear, loud, soft

*Smell: fresh, sweet, suffocating

*Taste: bitter, flat, sweet, sour

*Touch: smooth, rough, sharp, hot, cold, heavy, light

2.1.2 Facts and statistics

A fact is information that has been or can be proved true. For example, the statement “bats are the only flying mammals” is a fact science has proved.

A statistic is a fact containing a number e.g. “there are 1000 living species of bats”

NOTE: When you develop a paragraph with facts and statistics, use enough information to make your point but avoid using facts and statistics that are not related to your central idea.

2.1.3 Examples

Example is a specific case that illustrates a general idea or statement. Examples can make a writer's meaning clear by answering the question “what do you mean by that?” key words and phrases such as *for example*, *for instance*, *that is*, and *for this reasons* are often used to introduce a specific example.

2.1.4 Cause and effect (*reason & result*)

“Why..... happened” OR “The effects of.....”

Cause – effect paragraph investigate why things are as they are, or why something happened, or the effects of an event or a situation.

2.1.5 Comparison and contrast

When you develop a paragraph by comparison and contrast, you point out similarities and differences between people or places, ideas, opinions, points of view, and so on.

In using the comparison - and contrast method, it is important to compare similar features of both items. For example, if you are comparing two books and discuss the exiting characters in one, you should also discuss the characters in the other. Listing the ways the two items to be compared are alike and different will ensure that you discuss the same features in both items.

3. The concluding sentences

It may be found as the last sentence of a paragraph. It can finish a paragraph by repeating the main idea or just giving a final comment about it.

“The final sentence of a paragraph is called the concluding sentence. It sums up the main points or restates the main idea in a different way. A sentence that sums up the paragraph reminds the reader of what the writer’s main idea and supporting points were.” (Rumisek 2005: 11)

4. Unity, coherence and cohesion

A coherent paragraph is an easy and an understandable paragraph to the reader through reasonable connections between ideas. All details or example used for

developing the topic sentence should be arranged in a logical order and related to the controlling idea.

“To be coherent a paragraph must satisfy two criteria: first, relevance – every idea must relate to the topic. Second, effective order – ideas must be arranged in a way that clarifies their logic or their importance.” (Kane 2000: 95)

“When a paragraph includes a sequence of sentences that are all related to the topic sentence it is unified. A paragraph that has a continuous line of thought that passes from sentence to sentence is coherent.”(O’Donnell & Judith1993:4)

Unity in a paragraph means that the entire paragraph is centered and concerned with a single idea.

“Paragraph unity involves two related but distinct concepts: coherence and follow. Coherence means that the ideas fit together. Follow means that the sentences link up so that readers are not conscious of gaps.”(Kane 2000: 95)

Unity is singleness of purpose; it means that everything in the document is essentially about one idea.

“Writing is coherent when the relationship among ideas is clear to the reader. Coherent writing moves logically and consistently from point to point. Each idea should relate clearly to the other ideas, with one idea flowing smoothly to the next.” (Viades 2002:85)

Coherence is an output of many factors that combine together to make every piece of writing meaningful and clear. Coherence in writing is more difficult than that in speech. Writers have no choices of nonverbal signs like that in spoken language to inform them that their messages are clear or not.

*To achieve unity, the writer must select one **topic** and then treat it with singleness of purpose, without*

*digressing into unrelated or loosely related paths. The logical sequence provided by a good **outline** is essential to achieving unity. An outline enables the writer to lay out the most direct route from **introduction** to **conclusion**. After you have completed your outline check it to see that each part relates to your subject.*
(Viades 2002:83)

“Cohesion means linking phrases together so that the whole text is clear and readable. It is achieved by several methods, such as the use of conjunctions. Another is the linking of phrases and sentences with words like *he*, *they* and *that* which refer back to something mentioned before”

5. Types of paragraphs

There are several types of writing like other skills of English language: descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive. These types of writing are usually determined by the purpose of the writers as well as by their audience.

5.1 Descriptive paragraph

This type of paragraph describes something and shows the reader what a thing or a person is like. The words chosen in the description often appeal to the five senses of touch, smell, sight, sound, and taste. Descriptive paragraphs can be artistic and may deviate from grammatical norms.

5.2 Narrative paragraph

A narrative writing is a meaningful sequences of events told in words. Sequence involves the chronological ordering of true or emarginated events.

The main goal of narrative writing is to narrate a sequence of events and scenes with sensory details and appropriate strategies to develop plot and character. The writer presents an action or a series of actions in such a way that the reader has a sense of being present at that time and place. (Cathcart et al 2003:3)

Narrative writing describes what happened and how it happened and why it happened. Writers observe, explore and reflect upon a wide range of experiences. It encourages creativity, and offers writers an opportunity to understand the emotions and actions of themselves and others. The significance of writing is often revealed through the writer's attitude employing strategies such as dialogue, voice, specification, and comparison and contrast of characters.

5.3 Expository paragraph (*Informational*)

The main purpose of expository writing is to inform or to explain. It is used to share knowledge and convey messages, or ideas. The writer produces a thesis statements and supports it with relevant evidence to provide the reader with knowledge that answers the “who, what, where, when, why, or how” of a subject”. This type of writing focuses on presenting information rather than persuading the reader.

5.4 Persuasive paragraph

The main purpose of persuasive writing is to persuade. The writer defends a position about a topic and supports it with evidences to provide the reader a convincing argument about the topic. Persuasive writing moves the reader to take an action or to form or change an opinion.

The most successful persuasive compositions provide the reader with convincing evidence. Clear and persuasive support is shared through a confident authoritative voice, giving the reader the impression that the writer is truly knowledgeable about the topic. The writer knows the topic, creates a convincing thesis, and appeals to the reader's interest in the introduction (Cathcart et al 2003:42)

5.5 Problem – solution paragraph

Problem / solution paragraph explains a problem and then gives many solutions to that problem.

"A problem paragraph describes and discusses a problem issue. The topic sentence names the issue you will discuss. The supporting sentences show why this issue is a problemThe first paragraph – the problem paragraph – explains the problem. The topic sentence of the second paragraph – the solution paragraph – introduces your solution or solutions. The supporting sentences show how your solution(s) will solve the problem"(Rumisek 2005: 53)

6. The process of writing a paragraph

1. The Chosen subject should be known to writers.
2. Identify the audience.
3. Narrow the subject to an interesting topic.
4. Collect some ideas about the topic.
5. List details about some of the ideas that will interest the audience.

6. Limit the ideas to the most important ones.
7. State the main idea of the paragraph in the topic sentence.
8. Write the paragraph, using the listed details.

7. Results and Discussion

This study discusses the results of the test on paragraph writing which was given to the second year students (3rd semester), at the Faculty of Arts, the University of Shendi on writing sound paragraph. The following tables show the grading and evaluation of the results obtained by the students and the percentage.

Table No. (1) Shows the number of the sample and the distribution of the sex.

Sex	Frequency	Percent
Male	14	29.2
Female	34	70.8
Total	48	100.0

According to data presented in table (1) **48** students are the sample of the study, **14** males and **34** females, and they all form **100%** of the study sample.

Step 1 “The paragraph has a topic sentence”

Table No. (2) Shows the performance of the students regarding step1.

Step1	Frequency	Percent
Yes	20	41.7
Fair	2	4.2
No	26	54.2
Total	48	100.0

According to data presented in table (2), **54.2** (26) of the students failed to write paragraphs that containing topic sentences.

Step 2 “The topic sentence is developed with descriptive details”.

Table No. (3) Shows the performance of the students regarding step2.

Step2	Frequency	Percent
Yes	20	41.7
Fair	26	54.2
No	2	4.2
Total	48	100.0

According to data presented in table (3), **54.2** (26) of the students' paragraphs are not well illustrated with developing sentences.

Step 3 “Each detail in the developing sentences relates clearly to the topic sentence (unified paragraph)”

Table No. (4) Shows the performance of the students regarding step 3.

Step3	Frequency	Percent
Yes	13	27.1
Fair	27	56.2
No	8	16.7
Total	48	100.0

According to data presented in table (4), **56.2**(27) of the students' paragraphs developing sentences are not well related clearly to the topic sentence (unified paragraph)”

Step 4 “The paragraph has a concluding sentence”

Table No. (5) Shows the performance of the students regarding step4.

Step4	Frequency	Percent
Yes	7	14.6
Fair	6	12.5
No	35	72.9
Total	48	100.0

According to data presented in table (5), 72.9 (35) of the students' paragraphs have no concluding sentences.

Step 5 “The entire paragraph is logically organizes and understandable (coherent)”

Table No. (6) Shows the performance of the students regarding step5.

Step5	Frequency	Percent
Yes	7	14.6
Fair	18	37.5
No	23	47.9
Total	48	100.0

According to table (6), 47.9(23) of the students' paragraphs are not logically organized and understandable (coherent)”

8. Conclusion

This study examined the ability of semester three students at Faculty of Arts at Shendi University on how to write a good paragraph. It was noticed that most students have difficulties in writing a good paragraph due to their inability to use both the technical and mechanical techniques of writings a good paragraph. Only half of the students succeeded in including a good topic sentence in their paragraphs and well illustrating developing sentences. Also the majority of the students failed to structure a well unified paragraphs and concluding sentences that restate the idea from the topic sentences.

9. Recommendations

Considering the findings of the study, and in order to participate in solving the students' weakness in writing skills, the researcher recommends and suggests the following

- Writing skill should be taught, practiced, and developed early at pre tertiary level to build a strong base for learning it at tertiary level.
- More consideration should be given to writing skill.
- Teachers should give extra attention to teaching syntax.
- Students' motivation to write should be maintained.
- Students' awareness of writing skills should be raised.
- Curriculum should include enough writing skills courses.
- More writing activities should be given to students.

10. References

- Yule, G. (2006), **The Study of Language**, U.K. Cambridge University Press.
- Winterowd, W, R, & Murray, P, Y, (1985), **English Writing and Skills**, Chicago, Coronado Publisher.
- Reid, J. M. (1988), **the process of composition**, New Jersey, Englewood Cliffs
- Rozakis, L. PH.D- (2003) **English Grammar for the Utterly Confused**, U.S.A, Mc Graw – Hill,
- Zemach D.E. & Rumisek, L. A. (2005), **Academic Writing from Paragraph to Essay**, Oxford, Macmillan publishers
- Peter Treacher, Zuzana Svobodova, Heidrun Katzorke, Ursula Jaekel, Stefania Dugovicova, Mike Scoggin, (2000), **writing in English**, Leonardo da Vinci programme European Commission
- Bailey, S. (2006) **Academic Writing**, New York, Taylor & Francis e, Library
- Idrees, A. M. & Hago, O. E. (2006), **Writing Skills 1**, Open University of Sudan
- Idrees, A. M. & Hago, O. E. (2006), **Writing Skills 2**, Open University of Sudan
- Mohammad, M. M. (2010) **Evaluation of the Paragraph Writing Ability among Sudanese Learners of English as a Foreign Language**, unpublished MA, University of Sudan of science and technology