Paragraph Writing Challenges Faced by University EFL Learners

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Abstract: *Writing is a significant language skill that is widely influential when it comes to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at universities who study English for academic purposes (EAP), since the majority of the tests they take in their department are for both grammar and literature lessons which require writing. Thus, writing paragraphs is crucial for EFL learners in order for them to write efficiently and correctly in order to pass the exams. Moreover, it is important for their future experience and teaching careers.*

In writing paragraphs, EFL learners face a number of challenges. This paper has been written in order to address and identify these challenges in relation to paragraph writing. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to explore and discuss the challenges that Kurdish EFL learners experience with regard to paragraph writing.

In this paper, it is been hypothesised that Kurdish EFL learners face substantial challenges in writing paragraphs, such as paragraph components and mixing a number of ideas in one paragraph. Similarly, as expected, both have been discovered as two major challenges with some others like irrelevance of controlling ideas and support, redundancy and repetition and a lack of description. To explore the above mentioned challenges associated with writing paragraphs, 40 pieces of writing are taken as samples. The targeted learners are from different levels with various backgrounds and experiences in writing.

This paper begins with an introduction which consists of a background with regard to the importance of writing, and then a consideration of the aim and methodology followed for this research. After that, the discussions and the findings of this research are presented, based on the samples collected from the targeted learners. Finally, some conclusions are offered.

Keywords: *EAP, EFL, paragraph challenge, mother tongue, first language influence, cultural influence, peer editing.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing can be found in almost all the world's languages. English, as one of the dynamic global languages, emphasises the importance of writing in different settings and contexts. So, writing is one of the productive skills with regard to the English language, and it is widespread and critical, particularly in the area of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) since it is used to communicate and express the ideas of the learners (Meyers, 2006; Harmer, 2007).

A paragraph is a group of related sentences that deal with a specific topic (Zemach & Rumisek, 2003). Writing a paragraph is one of the initial steps of the writing process that contains some procedures, so that the learners can follow these to produce a good piece of writing in various contexts such as at a university. So, writing in general potentially has many benefits for EFL university learners.

1.1. The Importance of Writing

There are many significant aspects of writing, but the ones relevant to EFL targeted learners at university are reinforcing other language skills and systems, passing exams and future careers. For example, it can be integrated with reading and listening skills activities. Consequently all skills are further practiced and improved (Meyers, 2009). Moreover, since language systems such as grammar and vocabulary are integral parts of writing, both are used within writing, and this may help the learners to develop their English in general (Harmer, 2004).

Another important aspect of writing for the targeted learners is writing for the sake of writing (Harmer, 2004). In other words, there are some other aspects of language such as punctuation and

capitalisation that they are essential in writing. So, through writing, learners can know more about the use of punctuation and capitalisation. Furthermore, writing is essential for almost all the lessons they study. So, their exams need writing rather that communication and the learners only use writing to do so. That is to say, this is called writing for the sake of learning (Meyers, 2009). The more ability they have in terms of writing, the more success they may achieve in their tests. This is in addition to the fact that writing is useful for their future careers.

Because of the importance noted above, English writing is included in almost all the syllabuses of Kurdistan universities/ English language departments. Since English is not the mother tongue of the targeted learners, the expectations of having many challenges associated with writing paragraphs are high, but they are still not clear.

1.2. Aim of the Paper

The aim of the paper is to explore, identify and examine the paragraph writing challenges faced by Kurdish EFL University learners. To achieve this, the EFL students themselves have participated in the research described in this paper.

1.3. Methodology

For this paper, 40 paragraph samples were taken as a data collection method in order to identify the challenges they represented. Random sampling was used to select 40 learners amongst nearly 200 second and third year students from the English Department of Sulaimani University. This may provide unexpected findings as the sampling procedure is not focused on a specific group of students (Oliver, 1997). Their participation was intentional, and their consent was obtained before writing the paragraphs. This is due to a desire to address the ethical research issues (Flick, 2009).

All 40 respondents wrote a paragraph, and later the challenges were discussed and identified. The topic of the paragraph was a daily life subject that each participant had experienced. They were given as much time as needed to write the paragraph. This is to make sure that they were not under any psychological pressure.

The data analysis method was the use of thematic codes in which the codes (challenges) were presented on the basis of the data received. These were categorised for analysis (Sapsford and Jupp, 2006).

1.4. Structure of the Paper

This paper is composed of three main chapters; introduction, discussion and findings, and conclusion. The first section is further divided into the importance of writing, aim of the research and methodology. Following that, discussions and findings are presented. Like any paper, it ends with the conclusions.

2. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

As illustrated above, to identify the challenges faced by EFL learners when it comes to writing paragraphs, this research was carried out. Although grammar, punctuation, capitalisation and spelling are learner challenges when it comes to writing a paragraph, some other issues that are relevant to the components of a paragraph, ideas for paragraph construction, etc… are explored in this paper. The reason for the exclusion of grammar and other related issues is due to the fact that, and personal experience shows this as well, they need a considerable amount of time for the learners to overcome them, and they also appear not to be as effective as the challenges which the research focuses on. Therefore, paragraph components, irrelevance of controlling ideas and support, mixing a number of ideas in one paragraph, repetition and redundancy, and lack of description, are amongst the common challenges that are found with regard to EFL learners.

2.1. Paragraph Components

Paragraph in English primarily consist of three parts - topic sentence, support and conclusion (Ruetten, 1997). If any learners follow and apply these suggested aspects, they may be crucial and helpful in order for them to produce successful and meaningful paragraphs. However, one of the common challenges that more than half of the respondents encountered is writing a paragraph without following paragraph components consistently. For example, there are some respondents who did not follow the suggested components, and that might have led to a downgrade of their overall work,

whereas some others used some support sentences without a clear topic sentence. Thus, in their writing, they either used none of the parts of the paragraph or used them in a disorganised way.

There are some possible factors behind this issue. Since Kurdish is the mother tongue for all the respondents, one of the factors may be the fact that such paragraph components are not found in the Kurdish language in that it is a Middle Eastern language (Rubens and Southard, 2004). So, the first language (L1) influence perhaps contributes highly to the learner's writing style (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Another factor is that the learners might have misunderstood and used wrong practice paragraph components of composition material when they studied them in detail over two years. That is, they have been taught how to write English paragraphs based on paragraph components, but they may not be able to apply them in their writing. i.e. a lack of knowledge may also be involved. Therefore, whatever the reasons, their paragraph writing is not at a required level for an English Department university student. Alternatively, the targeted learners are not only required to follow the paragraph components, but they are also required to practice them many times until they have upgraded their overall writing skill.

2.2. The Irrelevance of Controlling Ideas and Support

Controlling ideas is the main part of a topic sentence, and it gives the reader an idea of what is going to be mentioned in the whole paragraph (Ostrom and Cook, 1993). What is shown as the controlling idea must be backed up in the subsequent part, which is the support. Otherwise, they will be irrelevant and lead to the production of a poor paragraph (Arnaudet and Barrett, 1990). This case is evident in more than half of the respondents because there is not any relationship between the presented controlling idea (ideas) and the development of the paragraph.

For instance, the main idea is about "differences", and in the support part of the paragraph, the respondents either wrote about only one side of the difference and ignored the other, or wrote about the "importance" of the topic. Thus, it can be irrelevant, and it may cause total misunderstanding on the part of the reader. As a solution, it could be controlled through further practice by the teachers as well as student self-study.

2.3. Mixing a Number of Ideas in One Paragraph

One of the challenges facing many eastern learners when it comes to writing English is mixing a number of ideas in one paragraph (Rubens and Southard, 2004). Likewise, it is one of the challenges faced by less than half of the targeted EFL Kurdish respondents. Almost all the English paragraph writers unanimously were convinced that a paragraph must contain one idea; otherwise, it will be difficult for the reader to understand the point(s) that are focused on in the controlling idea (Ostrom and Cook, 1993).

Many of the targeted students repeatedly mixed a lot of ideas in the paragraphs examined in this paper. Instead of only writing about the "differences" of the old and new campuses of Sulaimani University, they wrote about differences, similarities, descriptions of the university, etc…This may create concerns amongst readers as they might be confused about what is/are the idea/ideas contained in the paragraph. Furthermore, it might create a lot of redundancies and repetitions which will be discussed as the next challenge facing the targeted students. As shown above, this occurs in the majority of eastern cultures. That is why cultural influences may have an effect in this regard. In other words, languages are fundamentally different from one another. Alternatively, the targeted learners might have concentrated on the suggestion of one idea for one paragraph.

2.4. Redundancy and Repetition

As mentioned in terms of previous challenges, due to a mixture of ideas, there might be many redundancies and repetitions in Kurdish EFL learners' paragraph writing. This is one of the most common paragraph writing challenges for more than a quarter of the targeted students. Once the learners have lots of mixed ideas in one paragraph, the possibility of having many extra words, unnecessary information and repetition is high. Because of such repetition, a lack of interest in the writing on the part of the reader might exist. For instance, the targeted learners are repeating one difference initially and in the final point. This idea may be exactly repeated with changing the words even though the topic was part of the respondents' life experience and seemed simple. That is to say, they are paraphrasing it. However, personal experience has shown that it might be reduced by taking a range of actions such as practicing a lot, putting the learners into groups, peer editing and

demonstrating the way to avoid using them. That is why redundancy and repetition are amongst the other challenges that this research identified.

2.5. Lack of Description

The final challenge that this research identified was a lack of description, in that the paragraphs included no or hardly used reasons, explanations and examples to support the points that the targeted learners made in their paragraphs. Nearly a quarter of the respondents had this problem. In English writing, it is necessary that in order to make a point in a paragraph, the writer must provide at least one reason, how it happened, or provides examples as much as needed (Ostrom and Cook, 1993). This may offer evidence that the writer is thinking critically, and it seems to make the paragraph stronger and more effective.

One the other hand, this is not seen in some paragraphs. For example, several respondents only said, "One of the differences between the old and the new campus is that the new campus is bigger than the old campus". Then, they suddenly moved to another point without writing more in terms of "why?" and "how?" responses. This is rather like a shopping list. This way of writing is unacceptable and shows a lack of critical thinking. The reason behind this challenge may relate to the fact that critical thinking may not exist in their previous writing background. Therefore, this also has a reflection on their English paragraph writing. As a result, this impacts on the quality of their paragraph writing.

3. CONCLUSION

- Writing is an important skill that has many benefits for the targeted learners in terms of developing better language ability, offering a better opportunity for passing exams, and finally supporting the student's future career.

- There are some challenges that the Kurdish EFL learners at University of Sulaimani face, namely, paragraph components, the irrelevance between controlling ideas and providing support, mixing a number of ideas in one paragraph, redundancy and repetition, and a lack of description.

- The reasons for each challenge are various. So, different factors such as L1 influence, lack of knowledge, cultural influences, mixing a number of ideas and lack of critical thinking in the previous writing background of the students may cause these challenges to exist.

- There is at least one possible suggestion with regard to reducing each challenge. Amongst the common ones are having more practice and increasing the number of activities by both teachers and the targeted learners themselves, peer editing, working in groups, and demonstrating how to overcome the challenges and focusing on one idea in one paragraph rather than many ideas in one paragraph.

- Each of the paragraph writing challenge discussed above is a real barrier for the targeted learners. If they do not overcome these challenges, it will have a negative impact on the learners' writing when it comes to passing exams as all the tests they take require writing skills. Also, it could damage their future careers.

- All the respondents face more than one writing challenges at the same time.

- So far, the key challenges have been shown and possible suggestions have been provided. It is a good idea if the teachers and lecturers design at least part of their writing materials based on the outcomes of this paper. Otherwise, the challenges in terms of this important skill will continue to be experienced by EFL Kurdish learners at university level.

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