


Challenges for College Students in Paragraph Writing at a Public Sector College in Pakistan: A Case Study
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Abstract

Writing in English is extremely important language skill especially when it comes to academic and professional success. As a result, writing in English has received attention around the world including Pakistan. Like all other non-native English language learners across the world, Pakistani students struggle to write well-organized paragraphs which are a key component of secondary and higher secondary exams. Under qualitative research paradigm, the current study was, therefore, conducted to explore the challenges for college students in paragraph writing at a public sector college in Pakistan. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews from four purposively sampled female participants. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that students faced problems related to pedagogy, assessment, feedback and revision. More specifically, majority of the participants shared that they reproduced paragraphs rather than writing on their own; the assessment was grammar-focused; there was a lack of constructive feedback on paragraphs; also, there were very limited opportunities for revision. Although the study is an addition to the literature on writing skills in Pakistani context, its significance lies in highlighting females' voices in the literature. The study will have implications for teachers teaching English in public sector colleges.

Introduction

Currently, English is the global language used not only for communication but also education, science, technology, trade and commerce, and many other facets of life (Rao, 2019). It has also evolved into a medium of instruction, and a major means of knowledge exchange, particularly in the field of education (Mahboob, 2014). Given its huge global significance, it is also strongly encouraged in Pakistan. In addition to being the official language of Pakistan, English is also used as the medium of instruction (Mahboob, 2020). Because of the English language's exponential global expansion, proficiency in all four language domains—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—is now essential for academic and professional success. However, research indicates that second language learners have numerous challenges when acquiring this foreign language. Most importantly, many students struggle with writing because it requires them to communicate their ideas in an orderly and well-planned manner (Rahman & Susanti, 2022). Although a language student is expected to be proficient in written communication in order to convey one's thoughts, ideas, and feelings through words (Alfaki, 2015), writing something that is worthy of reading is extremely difficult for learners, particularly those who are learning English as a second language. Research suggests that Pakistani students also face challenges in writing. Specifically, studies indicate that there are significant errors in spelling, sentence construction, tense, punctuation, and paragraph structure made by pupils in Pakistan at all educational levels (Javed et al., 2013). Many students in Pakistan also struggle greatly to write even a proper paragraph (Farooq et al., 2012). This problem is particularly acute for students who attend government institutions. Their problems multiply as these students get enrolled in universities where they are expected to write paragraphs, essays and assignments for their four-year degree programs—or, more crucially, as they prepare themselves for getting a competitive job. When asked to write on any given topic, students in colleges find it difficult to organize their thoughts

and write a paragraph (Akbar et al., 2018). Given the importance of writing in their academic and professional careers, it is essential to explore and address this issue. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the challenges college students face in writing paragraphs at a public sector college in Pakistan.

Research Questions

What are the challenges for college students in paragraph writing at a public sector college in Sukkur, Pakistan?

Literature Review

Writing is one of the most crucial language skills. According to Emig (2020), Writing as a process and a product has a set of characteristics that make it a unique learning tool. Writing also use this symbolic system to express themselves. Nunan (2003) believed that writing is a mental and physical endeavor equally. It is mental in that it necessitates the generation of ideas, thinking through their expression, and organizing them into sentences and paragraphs so that the reader can easily understand the text. It is physical in that the writer uses a medium to express his ideas or thoughts. As a result, effective writing must have proper sentence structure, lexical and grammatical accuracy, subject matter appropriateness, and idea development and organization (Alfaki, 2015). According to Javed et al. (2013), writing skills necessitate the presentation of ideas in a well-structured and well-organized manner.

Concerning the arrangement and composition of the content, a paragraph is undoubtedly the most important element to understand. Because sentences join together to make paragraphs which then put together form letters, reports, essays, and other longer works of composition (Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008), the significance of a paragraph in any document is paramount. According to Langan (2010), a paragraph consists of a topic sentence, three or more supporting sentences and specific details, and a concluding sentence. Each topic sentence in a paragraph should address a single idea, and it is typically found at the start of a paragraph. The topic sentence expresses the primary concept of the entire paragraph. Then there are the supporting sentences, which offer information that somehow contributes to the main theme. A closing statement, found at the end of a paragraph, can either reiterate the main sentence or provide a summary of the paragraph as a whole (Kemper et al., 2018).

According to research, creating something worth reading can be a difficult endeavor for learners who are not native speakers because they need to pay close attention to details like word choice and spelling (Rass, 2015). However, these are significant issues for non-native English speakers. According to a study conducted in Bangladesh, learners struggled with grammar, sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, and organization of ideas while writing paragraphs (Afrin, 2016). A similar research study done in Israel revealed that Arab students' writing suffers greatly from issues with sentence structure and paragraph organization (Rass, 2015). Furthermore, a research from Sudan showed that students struggle with a variety of organizational issues, including their incapacity to appropriately expand paragraphs, differentiate between topic and closing sentences, and maintain focus within paragraphs. Similar challenges arise when Pakistani students try to write in English. According to a study conducted in the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunhuwa, even graduate students make mistakes with spelling, verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, and inappropriate vocabulary (Jamil et al., 2016). According to Farooq et al. (2012), a study done on college students in Lahore revealed that second language learners had trouble writing well-organized texts. A similar study was done in Karachi on undergraduate English language learners and it discovered that students struggle with vocabulary, grammar, topic sentences, content selection, and organization (Fareed et al., 2016).

According to a review of the literature, two major factors affect students' writing abilities when it comes to ESL learners in Pakistan: pedagogy and teacher feedback. Factors that affect teachers include inadequate training, traditional pedagogy, little to no (constructive) feedback, and difficulty inspiring students to write original write-ups (Fareed et al., 2016). The word "pedagogy" refers to a broad range of topics including interactions between instructors, students, the learning environment, and assignments. It also covers the pedagogical strategies instructors use in the classroom (Thomas, 2016). Three additional categories can be used to further categorize pedagogy: learning-centered, student-centered, and teacher-centered. The teacher is at the center of the learning process in teacher-centered pedagogy, and all teaching strategies—including "whole class lectures, rote memorization, and answering in unison"—center on the teacher's involvement and presence (Mascolo, 2009). The learner is in the receiving position because there is no presumptive prior knowledge. They thus take on a passive role during the entire process. Conversely, learner-centered teaching strategies highlight the students' active participation in the educational process. It asserts that students can create new knowledge because they have prior knowledge and experience. For this reason, this approach is sometimes referred to as the constructivist teaching approach (Cakir, 2008). According to Mascolo (2009), constructivism is the idea that students create their own knowledge through their experiences and actions in their surroundings. As a result, in this method, the teacher's job is to facilitate learning by setting up the right conditions. In student-centered classrooms, activities like role-plays, group discussions, and presentations are frequently used. Additionally, there is pedagogy that harmonizes the ideologies of the teacher and the learner. It is

referred to as a pedagogy that is learning-centered and consistently prioritizes learning. It claims that both approaches are successful in fostering learning. The purpose of these exercises is not to keep students moving. On the contrary, they are made to facilitate the intended learning (Alenoush Saroyan, 2004).

Another factor that affects students' writing abilities is teacher feedback. Writing is more than just stringing letters together to form words, sentences, and paragraphs; it also involves selecting the right words, creating meanings, and structuring ideas. Learners cannot learn all these sub-skills without getting effective feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). According to Narciss (2008), feedback tells students about their actual performance and/or learning status and enables them to determine whether their current learning aligns with the learning objectives in that particular context. However, researchers disagree on which aspects of feedback should receive more attention when it comes to written work. Generally, feedback is directed towards the content or idea, grammatical structure, spelling, and organizational aspects of the writing assignment (Lee, 2005). Teachers utilize feedback to convey both the positive and negative aspects of their students' writing (McGrath et al., 2011). A student can obtain feedback on his or her written work from two sources: peers and teachers. Peer feedback is the assessment of each other's work that identifies the student's strengths and weaknesses (Iswandari & Jiang, 2020). While both types of feedback are used in the classroom, research shows that students value teacher feedback more because they believe that teachers can offer the most helpful feedback. Additionally, research indicates that teachers' responses may be more appropriate and accurate in helping students become more proficient in language (Ruegg, 2015). The benefits of the two types of feedback vary. According to research, when teachers provide written feedback, students are better able to modify their texts because the teacher can offer clarifications and comments on their work (Susanti, 2013). Conversely, when a teacher provides oral feedback, students can interact with them face-to-face, ask questions about specific confusions, and receive explanations (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). However, that can only occur if the student participates actively in the feedback process rather than passively (Carless, 2022).

To summarize, writing is one of the most crucial abilities that necessitates having the ability to effectively and appropriately convey one's ideas, thoughts, and experiences. Students everywhere, however, struggle with writing assignments that are incorrect in terms of sentence structure, language mechanics, and idea organization. Similar challenges are faced by English language learners in Pakistan, with paragraph structure being one of the main problems. Research findings indicate that the pedagogy employed by educators and the feedback they offer their students are among the numerous elements that impact students' writing abilities.

Methodology

Research Design

Since the aim of the present study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of the challenges for college in paragraph writing at a public sector college in Pakistan, the study used qualitative research approach. More specifically, case study design was employed to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' challenges. A case study gathers multiple "instances of a particular phenomenon in order to give a detailed description of the events, relationships, experiences, or processes that took place in that specific instance" (Denscombe, 2014).

Context

This research site i.e., a public sector college in Sukkur was chosen for two reasons- ease of access to the data and the multicultural, multilingual students population. Since the college is situated in the center of an urban setting, it attracts students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds as well. This institution welcomes students from all over the city for a variety of degree programs e.g. Pre-medical, Pre-Engineering, Commerce and Computer Science. As a result, the sample will be varied with regard to age, academic background, and religion.

Sampling and Participants

Four female, who had recently completed their matriculation from government institutions in the province of Sindh, were chosen as a sample using the purposive sampling technique. With the help of purposeful sampling, researchers can select participants based on the attributes that best fit the goals of the study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Purposive sampling, therefore, made it possible to obtain a sample pertinent to the aims of the study.

Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview tool was prepared to gather the views of chosen participants regarding the challenges they face in paragraph writing. More specifically, they were asked to share their challenges related to pedagogy and teacher feedback. Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to ask pre-planned questions of the participant or participants in order to extract information from them. Participants are able to draw attention to the issues that are important to them (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). As a result, this tool was employed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' challenges with paragraph writing. After obtaining the participants' consent, the interviews were conducted and recorded.

Data Analysis

To determine the themes that emerged from the interview transcripts, thematic analysis technique was applied. According to studies, thematic analysis is the procedure that helps the investigator to find patterns in the qualitative data and extract themes from it. Because it enables the researcher to examine and evaluate unique experiences and perspectives and interpret the data, theme analysis is a reliable method in qualitative research (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In this regard, six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019) were followed: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and doing the write-up.

Findings

Following themes emerged after a thematic analysis of the interviews conducted from four participants, all of them females from a public sector college in Sukkur, Pakistan.

Reproduction of Paragraphs

Views of the participants of the study revealed that they were supposed to reproduce the paragraphs instead of writing on their own. They were either asked to copy the text that the teachers had written on the blackboard or given a set of notes on which paragraphs and essays were already written. They just had to cram and reproduce on tests. For example, Participant 4 said, *The paragraph was written on the (black) board...teacher would write it, and we would have to write it down in our registers and memorize it.* Likewise, Participant 2 shared that *To write a paragraph in the test...and pass the (class) test, ma'am would give us notes of paragraphs or essays that we could memorize and write in the test.* This indicates that participants merely reproduced the texts instead of doing writing as a process. Another important point to pick from the quote is the focus of students on 'passing the test' rather than actual assessment of their skills. This also points out the exam-focused culture in colleges.

Grammar-focused Assessment

Another theme that surfaced from the students' interview transcripts was teachers' focus on grammatical corrections instead of helping students develop and structure their ideas. Participant 1 reported, *We are encouraged to create original work and are given some freedom to write on own.* Since this idea was contradictory to the general views student shared, further inquiry was made which revealed that their English teacher was a recently appointed teacher who had done her master's from a leading university; therefore, Participant 1 shared that *her practices were slightly different.* However, views about this teacher's assessment practices were the same. For instance, Participant 1 stated that *the teacher would mark her copy red because her write-up was so full of (grammatical) mistakes.* This suggests that although the newly recruited teacher gave students some liberty to think about topics and write, the assessment was purely grammar-focused. The teacher gave very little attention to this participant's ideas in the paragraph.

Lack of Feedback on Paragraphs

According to the above findings, students were compelled to copy texts from the board rather than writing on their own. Thus, the component of actual writing feedback was absent. Though the teacher was occasionally prepared to provide feedback (as in case of Participant 1 above), the teacher found it extremely challenging to interact with every student in the class due to overcrowding. Participant 3 shared, *We were back-benchers...teacher would take time to check the work and often the 40-min class ended before she could reach us for checking ...and the teacher would have to leave for the other teacher to come in.* This demonstrates that teachers did not provide personalized feedback to each student on their work. Another Participant 2 mentioned that *it was difficult to obtain written feedback when I went to the staff room or teacher's office...after a brief review of the assignment, the teacher replied that the work is okay or it is good...I did not think she read my work carefully.* These comments point out that feedback on students' write-ups is not a common practice. Even if some students try to get feedback on their drafts, there are different challenges for them.

Limited Opportunities for Revision

Moreover, the findings suggest a lack of emphasis on revision of drafts which is a crucial aspect of developing strong writing skills. The focus on memorization and reproducing paragraphs along with the time constraints mentioned in participants' views indicate limited opportunities for students to revise and improve their writing based on feedback. For example, Participant 1 stated *we never had a chance to rewrite our paragraphs... by the time we ...sometimes wrote the paragraphs... class was over and receiving feedback and incorporating it into writing was impossible.* Similarly, Participant 4 mentioned *I wrote one paragraph once... even if I wanted to improve my writing there wasn't much time to revise in class...the teacher would sometimes just collect our work and give feedback on language in next class...that's it.* These comments show that students did not receive proper feedback due to time and more focus on grammatical aspects. Therefore, it can be deduced that their drafts lacked refinement and structure. This also suggests that the fast-paced nature of the class and the focus on completing tasks or lessons left little room for students to engage in the iterative process of revision.

Discussion

The present study explored the challenges college students face in writing paragraphs at a public sector college in Sukkur, Pakistan. The findings revealed that reproduction of paragraphs, grammar-focused assessment, lack of feedback on paragraphs and limited opportunities for revision are some of the most important challenges for students. The findings indicate that the instructors lack training in teaching writing in particular. The findings align with the study of Sajid and Siddiqui (2015) who noted similar results. Because of this, students are accustomed to copying and reproducing paragraphs, and the exam practices only serve to reinforce this habit. The teacher-centered approach prevents students from thinking independently about any subject or producing independent writing skills. The study supports the views of Hammad (2012), who holds that one of the main causes of poor writing is a deficiency of exposure to English language material. Apart from giving them exposure, teaching students to write a paragraph should involve strategies that give them enough time to brainstorm and come up with ideas for the topic (Wu & Garza, 2014). After that, they ought to be instructed on how to arrange their ideas logically and effectively. Teachers should also teach their students how to focus on one main idea per paragraph and develop a clear controlling idea besides teaching them how to properly switch between tenses and grammatical structures within a paragraph. They should also give students useful ideas to further explore topics. Additionally, the present study indicates that instructors do not give their students extra time outside the classroom. Even if the feedback is given, it is so superficial, only limited to grammatical mistakes and not the ideas. As a result, this feedback falls short of the actual goal of teacher feedback. Fareed et al. (2016) also agree that teachers do not take the students' needs or skill level into account.

Conclusion

The current study was carried out with the aim of exploring college students' challenges in paragraph writing in English. In light of the research's findings, it can be said that college students' paragraph writing in English language is significantly influenced by their teachers' pedagogy and feedback. Because teachers adopt a more teacher-centric pedagogical approach and offer little feedback to help students improve their writing skills, students struggle to create coherent, unique paragraphs. The findings of the study will have certain implications for teachers. To begin with, since mistakes are a natural part of the language learning process, students' mistakes can be an invaluable tool for enhancing their writing skills. Teachers should not assign labels to their students based only on their writing errors. In order for students to learn language in a variety of contexts, teachers should recognize their efforts and encourage them to write for a variety of reasons. Real sources can be used in the classroom, including printed reading materials, journals, websites, and newspapers to stimulate students' motivation. The study contributes to the literature on writing skills in Pakistan.

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