

Analyzing Factors Influencing the Paragraph Organization in English Language Writing of Intermediate Students

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Writing in English holds great importance throughout the world, especially when it comes to academic and professional excellence. Therefore, writing in English is given due status in Pakistan too. However, despite learning English for years, Pakistani students face difficulty in writing like other foreign language learners. One of the major issues in their writing is organization of ideas in a paragraph to convey the desired sense. The present qualitative study was, thus, conducted to analyze the factors that influence paragraph organization in the English language writing of students at the intermediate level. In this regard, semi-structured interviews were conducted from six participants belonging to different cities, and their writing samples were also collected and were later analyzed using a thematic analysis technique. The findings reveal that rote learning, more focus on grammar, and surface level feedback from teachers were the key factors at play. Hence, the students are unable to produce a well-organized text.

English is a “lingua franca” of the present world (Conrad & Mauranen, 2003). It is not only the language of trade and commerce, but also of education, science and technology, and many other fields of life. Especially in the domain of education, it has become a medium of instruction, language of research, and a means of meaningful transfer of knowledge (Mahboob, 2014). Keeping in view its huge importance across the globe, it is highly encouraged in Pakistan also. English is not only the official language of Pakistan, but also the medium of instruction throughout the country (Coleman, 2010).

This rapid growth of English language use across the globe has necessitated competence in all four areas of language- reading, writing, listening, and speaking. But studies suggest that L2 learners have to deal with countless problems in learning this foreign language. A large number of students face difficulties in writing because it demands presentation of ideas in a well-planned and well-organized way (Braine & Yorozu, 1998).

Since writing is a productive skill which demands great effort, writing something in foreign language or L2 becomes a much more demanding job. Learners, especially those learning English as a second language, face great trouble writing something worthy of reading. Similarly, students of Pakistan experience difficulties in learning the English language, especially mastering writing skills. Research studies suggest that students at various levels in Pakistan make serious mistakes in spelling, sentence structure, tense, punctuation and paragraph structure (Javed, Juan, & Nazli, 2013). Though the other problems learners face in learning English language have been widely researched, little attention has been given to the area of paragraph organization, especially at the intermediate level. Students who join public sector universities come from different academic backgrounds. It has been observed that those who come from government institutions—i.e., they have

done their Matriculation and Intermediate from a government school or college—suffer more in writing classes. Also, no research has been conducted to figure out the reasons leading to this problem for intermediate students.

Hence, the present paper is designed to analyze the factors that influence paragraph organization in English language writing of intermediate students in Sukkur, Sindh, Pakistan.

Problem Statement

Writing is one of the key areas when it comes to language proficiency. A language learner is supposed to be good at written communication so that he can express his thoughts, ideas and feelings through words (Alfaki, 2015). However, in Pakistan, many students face great trouble in writing even a proper paragraph (Farooq, Uzair-Ul-Hassan, & Wahid, 2012), and the students coming from government institutions experience greater trouble. Their troubles increase manifold as they enter universities where they are supposed to write long essays and assignments extensively in their four-year degree programs or, more importantly, get a competitive job. The students struggle with getting their ideas in paragraph form when they are asked to write on any given topic. This problem of students is of paramount importance given the troubles they face later in their lives.

Since resolution of this problem for students is imperative, this study aims to analyze the factors that influence paragraph organization in the English language writing of intermediate students in the district of Sukkur.

Research Question and Sub-questions

The major research question is, “What are the factors that influence the paragraph organization in

English language writing of intermediate students in Sukkur?" The sub-questions are the following:

1. What pedagogical approaches teachers use to teach paragraph in intermediate classes?
2. How do the teachers provide feedback to students to improve their paragraph writing?

Literature Review

What is writing? Writing is one of the most important skills of a language. Daniels and Bright (1996) describe writing as a system of symbols which represent an expression of the writer and it must be clear to the reader without the writer's intervention. However, writing is not that much simple. According to Nunan (2003), writing is a physical as well as a mental activity. It is physical in that the writer uses some medium to express his or her ideas or thoughts, and it is mental in that it requires generation of ideas and thinking about their expression and their organization into sentences and paragraphs in a way that the reader can easily understand the text. Hence, writing needs to be effective by having accuracy of grammar and vocabulary, appropriateness of sentence-structure and subject-matter, and development and organization of ideas (Alfaki, 2015). Another researcher states that writing skill demands that the thoughts be presented in well-structured and well-organized way (Javed et al., 2013).

What is a paragraph? When it comes to structure and organization of a text, the paragraph is unarguably the most important thing to be discussed. Words come together to form sentences; sentences join together to make a paragraph; and paragraphs combine together to form letters, reports, essays, and other larger texts (Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008). Thus, the importance of paragraph is pivotal in any text. A paragraph consists of a topic sentence, supporting sentences or details and a closing sentence (O'Donnell & Paiva, 1993), and all these sentences must relate to one idea only (Rajatanum, 1988). A topic sentence can be defined as a sentence that states the main idea of the whole paragraph and usually taking the first place in a paragraph. Then it is followed by supporting sentences which provide details that support the main idea in an appropriate way. The paragraph comes to a close with a final sentence that can be a restatement of the topic sentence or summary of the whole paragraph (Kemper, Meyer, Van Rys, & Sebranek, 2018).

Problems students face in writing. Research suggests that writing something worthy of reading is a tough task for native and non-native learners alike because one has to be careful about a number of things ranging from spelling to organization of text (Rass, 2015). But these problems are severe for the non-native speakers of the English language. A study conducted in

Bangladesh found that students have problems in writing in terms of spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and organization of ideas (Afrin, 2016). A similar study conducted in Israel revealed that sentence structure and paragraph organization were the major problems of Arab students in writing (Rass, 2015). In addition, one study published in Sudan showed that students have various problems in organization such as not differentiating between topic and closing sentences, not developing a paragraph properly, or not focusing on one idea in their paragraph.

Similarly, Pakistani students also face great trouble in writing in English. In research conducted in Khyber Pakhtukhwa (a province of Pakistan), it was found that even postgraduate students made mistakes in subject-verb agreement, verb tense, inappropriate vocabulary, and spelling (Jamil, Majoka, & Kamran, 2016). A study conducted in Lahore on college-level students stated that learners of a second language face difficulties in writing a "well-organized" presentation of information (Farooq et al., 2012). The same study highlighted spelling, punctuation, capitalization, the task of thinking in Urdu (the national language of Pakistan) and then translating the thought, and technicalities of grammar as major challenges faced by students in Pakistan. A similar research study done in Karachi showed that undergraduate learners of English face issues of vocabulary, syntax, content selection, topic sentence, and organization (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016).

Factors that influence writing skill. A literature review regarding factors influencing the writing skills of ESL learners in Pakistan reveals that writing skill of students is influenced by two key factors: teacher's pedagogy and teacher feedback. The teachers' lack of proper training, their traditional pedagogy, little or no (constructive) feedback, and their inability to motivate students for writing are a few factors related to teachers (Fareed et al., 2016).

Conceptualizing Pedagogy and Teacher Feedback

Pedagogy. Pedagogy is a broad term which covers the "interactions between teachers, students, and the learning environment and the learning tasks" (Thomas, 49). In addition to the relation between teachers and students, it also encompasses the instructional approaches teachers implement in the classroom setting (Thomas, 2016).

Pedagogy can further be divided into three broad categories such as teacher-centered, student-centered, and learning-centered. In teacher-centered pedagogy, the teacher is the center of the learning process, and all methods such as "whole-class lecture, rote memorization, and chorus answers (i.e., call-and-response)" revolve around his or her presence and input (Mascolo, 2009). The learners are on the receiving end because of the assumption of them having no prior knowledge. Hence, they play a passive role throughout the process.

On the other hand, a learner-centered pedagogical approach stresses learners' active role in the learning process. It states that learners have prior knowledge and experiences on the basis of which they can create new knowledge. That is why this method is also termed a constructivist approach to teaching (Cakir, 2008). Constructivism refers to the notion that learners construct their own knowledge based on their experiences and actions they perform in their environment (Mascolo, 2009). Thus, the role of a teacher in this approach is that of a facilitator who creates an environment for learning to happen. Presentations, small group discussions, role-plays, etc., are common practices in a student-centered classroom.

The third category of pedagogy is learning-centered pedagogy which reconciles both teacher-centered and learner-centered ideologies. Keeping learning at the focal point, it states that both approaches can be effective for the sake of learning. The activities are not designed to keep students active. Rather, they are designed to support the desired learning (Alenoush Saroyan, 2004).

Teacher feedback. Writing is not only about putting the letters together to form words, then combining them to make sentences and arranging them to become paragraphs, but also about choosing appropriate vocabulary, forming meaning, and organizing ideas. Also, feedback helps learners learn efficiently as it influences learning and subsequently achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Feedback is defined as "[the] post-response information which informs the learners on their actual states of learning and/or performance in order to help them detect if their states correspond to the learning aims in a given context" (Narciss, 2008). For a written work, the feedback is given on the content or ideas, grammatical structures, spelling, and organizational aspects of the writing assignment (Lee, 2005), but the views of researchers are divergent as to what aspect should receive more focus.

Educators make use of feedback to communicate the strengths and weaknesses of the writing of the students (McGrath, Taylor, & Pynchyl, 2011). Peer feedback and teacher feedback are two types a student receives on his or her written work. Peer feedback is defined as comments on strengths and weaknesses which students provide to one another on their work (Kroll, 2001). Although both forms of feedback are practiced in classrooms, studies reveal that teacher feedback is preferred because students hold the teachers' ability higher in providing the most suitable feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Studies also suggest that teachers' responses can be more accurate and appropriate to improve the students' language expertise (Cresswell, 2000).

Teachers provide feedback to students in both oral and written form. Each form of feedback has different

advantages. Researchers state that written feedback from teachers allows students to make better modifications in their writing because teachers write comments and explanations on students' work (Susanti, 2013). However, oral feedback from teachers allows students to have face-to-face interaction with them, helps them get explanations, and allows them to ask the teacher questions about certain confusions (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). But that is only possible when the learner is active and not passive during the process of feedback (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990).

Studies conducted in other contexts suggest that teachers' pedagogy and their feedback play vital roles in the development of writing skills of students. Ahmad, Khan, and Munir (2013) reported use of traditional teaching methods by teachers to teach writing at a secondary level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Fareed et al. (2016) also highlighted a pedagogic approach to writing and ineffective feedback as two major factors influencing the writing of students in Pakistan. However, there is no study that looks at writing, especially paragraph organization, in the writing of intermediate students in the context of Sukkur, Pakistan.

To summarize, writing is one of the most important skills and requires an individual to be good at expressing his/her ideas, thoughts, and experiences in an appropriate and effective way. However, students across the world face problems in writing with regard to accuracy of sentence structure, mechanics of language, and organization of ideas. Similarly, learners of the English language in Pakistan experience these difficulties, and paragraph organization has been one of the major issues. Studies revealed that teachers' pedagogy and the feedback the teacher provides to the learners are two of the many factors that affect the writing skills of students at the undergraduate level.

Methodology

The present study uses a qualitative research approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing paragraph organization in the English language writing of intermediate students in Sukkur, Pakistan.

Context

The intermediate level was selected because this level determines the academic and/or professional careers of students. In the context of Sukkur IBA University, six students in the Foundation semester and coming from different cities of Sindh were selected for this research, mainly for two reasons. First, the researcher studies at the university, which makes it easy for him to access participants and collect the data

without any hindrance. Second, Sukkur IBA University is considered to be the best university in the region and provides free and quality education to all knowledge-seekers. Students from far-flung areas join this institute for various degree programs.

Moreover, the choice of Foundation (also known as zero) semester was made because of its generic, multifaceted, and transitional nature. Students of this semester come from pre-medical, pre-engineering, and commerce backgrounds to get an education in English, Math, and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) only. All of them, regardless of their academic background, go through a common subjective test of all three subjects to get a permanent seat in the departments of their choice.

Thus, the sample was diverse in terms of gender, age, religion, and academic backgrounds.

Sampling

The technique of purposive sampling was employed to select a sample of six students (both male and female) from the Foundation semester students who had recently passed their Intermediate and had also done Matriculation from government institutes of Sindh province. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to choose participants on the basis of the qualities they possess because such choice suits the purpose of the study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Hence, purposive sampling enabled the researcher to get a sample that was relevant for this research in terms of diversity in the gender, age, religion, academic backgrounds and hometowns.

A questionnaire was administered to select a purposeful sample for the study. Since all respondents see the questions from the same angle, that uniformity makes a questionnaire an effective tool to collect demographic information such as facts about the participants. Although questionnaires have low response rates, studies suggest that questionnaire is the best way to collect such data (Fink, 2015).

Data Collection Tools

Writing sample. The first tools used for the research purposes were the writing samples of participants to see how they constructed topic sentences, how they developed the samples with supporting details, and how they concluded the samples. This documentary review is a “systematic data collection” (Bretschneider, Cirilli, Jones, Lynch, & Wilson, 2017) that enables the researcher to see the areas very closely in which the students frequently make mistakes.

Semi-structured interviews. The major tool was a semi-structured interview to get the views of each selected participant. A semi-structured interview is a tool which allows the researcher to interview the

participant(s) to elicit information from them by asking predetermined questions. It allows the participants to highlight the issues that are of importance to them (Longhurst, 2003). Therefore, this tool was used to get a holistic view of the participants’ problems in paragraph organization.

In order to conduct this interview, an interview guide was prepared which contained questions on students’ knowledge about paragraph organization, the strategies teachers used to teach them to write a paragraph, and the kinds of feedback they received from teachers and in what ways (see Appendix for interview guide).

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis technique was used to figure out the themes that evolved from the interview transcripts and samples. The method of thematic analysis is used for identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Studies define thematic analysis as the process that enables the researcher to identify patterns in the qualitative data and develop themes from it. Thematic analysis is reliable in qualitative research because it lets the researcher explore and analyze individual experiences and perceptions and make meaning of that data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Findings

Interviews

Interviews were conducted from six participants: two females and four males. The interviews were conducted and recorded after seeking the consent of the participants. The thematic analysis of the interview data uncovered the following themes.

Rote learning. The interviews with the research participants revealed that students were asked to copy the text written on the blackboard by the teachers themselves. The students were just supposed to cram [*sic*] the paragraphs or essays and reproduce the same during tests. One of the participants, coded as 4MMLK said, “Teacher would make us note down the paragraph from the (black) board, then we were asked to learn the paragraph by heart.” Another student (2FMSK) commented, “At the time of tests or exams, we were given topics of the essays which we had already done in the class or remembered from notes, and we used to write them to pass the (class) test.”

More focus on grammar. Another theme that emerged out of the transcriptions was that the teachers put more emphasis on grammatical corrections rather than guiding students in development and organization of ideas. Only one participant (1MMKH) said that he or she was

given some liberty to write on their own and were encouraged to produce something original. Upon further probing, it was found out that their English teacher was young and recently graduated which presumably made the situation different from the rest. However, the student said that the teacher would make their copies heavily corrected because their texts were replete with (grammatical) errors. It can be inferred from this that the teachers paid very little attention to organization of their thoughts in paragraphs.

Little or no feedback. As the above findings state, the teachers didn't make the students write on their own and instead made them copy texts from boards. This rules out the element of real feedback on writing. However, a few comments from the students implied that even though the teachers at times were ready to give feedback, it was very difficult for them to reach out to all the students in class because of overcrowded classes. A student (1MMKH) said, "We used to sit on the last seat, and by the time teacher could reach us for checking, the bell would ring and he had to leave for the other teacher to step in." This shows that students didn't receive individual attention from teachers regarding their work. Another participant (6MHMK) said that if he or she would go to the teacher's office or staff room but could hardly get any written feedback. The teacher would coldly check the work and return it, saying he or she was busy.

Written Work of Students

Although written work, especially writing paragraphs, has been a part of the English course over the years, students still make mistakes, especially in the organization of their ideas in a paragraph. In order to understand their errors on paragraph level, some thirty students were made to write a paragraph on a narrative topic "My first Day at University," and their write-ups were analyzed in the areas of topic sentence, concluding sentence, and supporting details, which constitute three elements of the paragraph.

Unclear topic sentences. The topic sentence is usually the first sentence of the paragraph and it states the main idea of the whole paragraph. The analysis of the students' writings revealed that students were unaware of this fact. They were unable to start with a statement that indicates the topic as well as the writer's opinion on that. A few examples of topic sentences from students' paragraphs are given below.

- a. It was bad but not much.
- b. I was surprised when I entered the university.
- c. My background is of government school and college.
- d. When I passed my intermediate, I was thinking about that how will be the environment of university.

Supporting details. Since the students didn't have a good opening to the paragraph, they struggled with having clear and well-directed supporting details of the respective topic sentences. They provided more and more content in the paragraphs rather than establishing the already-mentioned idea. This could be witnessed from the long sentences and the over-use of "and," "also," "so," and "then." Besides, little or no use of appropriate transitional words reflect inadequacy of their skill to construct well-organized and connected paragraphs. One of the samples read, "I meet with a girl she's name is sana and sana is also my roommate and she is also in the class... Then we go to visit seniors and then we got to cafeteria and drinks juice and then we go to hostile."

Concluding sentences. The majority of the students' written work had no appropriate concluding statement. Concluding sentences were either more general or deviated from the start of the paragraph or its topic, or they ended abruptly on the last detail in the list. And, once again, there were no transitional words to signal the concluding sentences.

- a. "He motivates us for studying and learning."
- b. "I met with many peoples who were excited and nervous like me and I got succeeded to make very few friends."
- c. "After a few minutes a boy named Vikran came towards and asked me about my name and where I am from, I told him."
- d. "Different places tells about places."

Discussion

The findings suggest that the teachers teaching at the college level lack efficient training and skills to teach a simple writing process. Moreover, the teachers do not have relevant degrees in English Language Teaching, especially writing skills. The same findings were observed by Ahmed (2010) and Sajid and Siddiqui (2015). That is why teachers are unable to impart writing skills and strategies to learners (Nik, Sani, Kamaruzaman, & Hasbollah, 2010). Thus, students are used to copying and reproducing paragraphs, and this tradition gets reinforcement because of the exam practices prevailing in the country. This teacher-centered approach doesn't let the students think about any topic on their own and write by themselves.

Moreover, teachers do not give time to students outside the class because when they are at college, they tend to be busy in social activities, or after college they work in different tuition centers to earn more and cater to their needs. Similar sorts of findings were reported by Ahmed (2010) in his study. Even if the teachers provide feedback, they do not consider the level or needs of the learners (Fareed et al., 2016). The feedback is so superficial that only language errors can be

rectified, and not the ideas. Hence, this feedback doesn't fulfil the true purpose of teacher feedback.

Conclusion

The research at hand was conducted with the aim of analyzing the factors that influence the paragraph organization in the English language writing of intermediate students. Keeping in view the findings of the research, it can be concluded that teachers' pedagogy and teacher feedback have great influence on the paragraph organization in the English language writing of the intermediate students. The students are unable to construct well-organized and original paragraphs because the teachers are more teacher centric in their pedagogical approach and provide negligible feedback for the improvement of learners' writing skill. Although the findings of the study can be generalized for the students at the intermediate level, the small sample stands as the limitation of the study.

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Appendix

ANALYZING FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PARAGRAPH ORGANIZATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE WRITING OF INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS INTERVIEW GUIDE

“Warm-Up” Question:

1. How are you?
2. How are you feeling to be a research participant?

Broad areas relevant to topic:

1. **Paragraph Organization**
 - a. How do you define a paragraph?
 - b. How is a paragraph organized? Or What are the elements of a paragraph?
 - c. What sort of problems do you face in writing a (well-organized) a paragraph?
2. **Strategies:**
 - a. How were you taught paragraph writing at your school and college?
 - b. Did your teacher make you understand the organization of a paragraph? How?

Probing

- c. Did the teacher engage you in certain group discussion sort of activities or he only delivered lecture?
3. **Feedback**
 - a. Did he/she tell you your strength and weakness in writing? What areas they identified?
 - b. How did the teacher provide you feedback on your work? Was it oral or written?
 - c. How the teacher’s feedback helped you to make a much better paragraph next time?
 - d. What changes you would make in your next draft after teacher’s feedback?