

Introspection into Academic Paragraph Writing Problems: A Case Study of International Training Program (ITP 44) at EFLU, Hyderabad, India

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Abstract

This study was conducted on forty fourth round Intermediate level International Training Program (ITP44) Students of the English and Foreign Language University at Hyderabad, India in 2013. The objective was to investigate the academic paragraph writing problems of the participating students and identify the root causes. Accordingly, all participants were considered as the study population due to size and country representation. Data was collected using students' questionnaire, analysis of the students' paragraph and interview with the teacher. Data collected was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approach. Hence, it was identified that the students' have problems of spelling, punctuations particularly in using comma, diction(word choice) and grammar particularly in using articles, prepositions and tenses. They also have problems of formality, objectiveness, complexity as well as sentence level problems like wordiness, awkward beginning, and fragmentation. Some of them also have run on and misplaced (dangling) modifier problems. Paragraph level qualities like coherence, completeness, unity and Cohesion are also lacking. Late starting of learning English and more importantly very late starting of learning about and practicing writing in English, the role of English as instructional medium in their respective countries, late exposure to performance type writing underlie the students' academic paragraph writing problems. Frequent use of mother tongue in English language classroom, the less value assigned to teaching English in general and teaching writing in particular, inadequacy of paragraphs writing exercises on their previous English language teaching text books and the resulting inadequacy of writing practices and the students' poor command over the English language are also identified as factor responsible for the problems. Previous English language teachers' lack of English language proficiency and motivation of teaching also underline the writing failures of some of the students.

Keywords; Academic writing, introspection, paragraph

Introduction

English language has become the language of international commerce, education, medicine, correspondences, scientific discovery and technology, tourism and travel, e-commerce, aviation and many other important global affairs. (Manivannan, 2006; Prakash, 2009). This status of English implies that people's competence in the global market is to a large extent governed by their English language commands of which one essential aspect is the English writing skills. In other words, individuals must write effectively in English to achieve the intended goals. Their writings at sentence, paragraph, essay and other levels must be effective to properly convey their messages.

However writing in general and academic writing in particular has been found to be a very difficult task (Maila, 2006 cited in Kasten, 2010; Byrne, 1979; Kasten, 2010). "Writers face daunting challenges when they compose as it involves intellect and curiosity, logic and language (Kasten, 2010). According to him texts of second language writers are typically less grammatical, less complex, and less organized.

Similarly, Raimes (1983) had described academic writing as difficult task that encompasses various components such as content, organization, grammar, syntax, mechanics, word choice, the targeted audience and the writer's process. As Nigel had reported and cited by

Kasten (2010), he expressed that academic writing presents particular difficulties to second language writers.

Although there are no coherent theories of academic writing (Silva in Kasten, 2010), there are certain commonly agreed upon features of a good academic paragraph. Firstly, the paragraph must possess the general features. This features include **complexity** which refers to being grammatically and lexically dense (Biber, 1988; Chafe, 1982; Cook, 1997; Holliday, 1989); **Formality** which stands for using only formal language avoiding colloquial words and expressions, abbreviated, two word verbs, sub-headings, numbering and bullet-points and asking questions, slang words, or jargon; **Precision** which refers to providing facts and figures precisely; **Objectivity** which stands for being impersonal. **Explicitness** in showing the relationship of idea in the different part of the text using different signaling words; **Accuracy** in using vocabulary and grammar in addition to **Responsibility** at providing evidence and justification are also among the general characteristics of academic writings (UEFAP, 2013).

At sentence level academic paragraphs should be free from different kinds of faultiness to be effective and efficient. It should be free from **comma splices** where two independent clauses are separated by **comma** only without a coordinating conjunction or semicolon, **fragment-**

ation which refers to the absence of subject verb or considering subordinate clause as a sentence, **run-on sentences** where independent clauses are joined without any punctuation, **faulty parallelism** where series are joined using unparallel grammatical structure like word with phrase.

It should also be free from wrong Pronoun Reference and should clearly refer to the nouns they stand for. Moreover, Misplaced and dangling Modifiers where modifiers and modifies are thrown apart or where modifiers are vague in their modification should be avoided. Modifiers should always be place next to modify in order to point clearly to the word or phrase they modify. **Subject verb agreement** problems where the subject doesn't agree with the verb in number and person, **awkward beginnings** and **wordiness** which refers to unnecessary extra words usage and expressions should be avoided (Yale graduate writing center; Richard P. Batteiger in SIUC writing center; Byrne, 1979).

Writing a good quality academic paragraph goes beyond effective and efficient sentences. There are qualities measurers that should be considered at paragraph level too. These includes essential elements like unity (including only one idea in a paragraph), order or coherence (proper arrangement of the sentences), variety (variation in the length and types of sentences), completeness (length) and cohesion (the physical

link between sentences using the divorced cohesive devices) (Fadi, 2010; Zhany, 2008; Nguye, 2008).

Fadi (2010) and Braddock *et al.*, (1963) identified weak foundation which is related to the country status in English, the students' motivation to learn English, the teachers' lack of interest, environmental reasons such as the use of the mother tongue, few opportunities to practice in English, the methods used in the country for teaching English included the medium of instruction, using mother tongue in English classes, teachers' low proficiency in English, and lack of writing practice in educational institutions as potential factors for writing problems.

The ITP 44 Intermediate group like all other Non native English users seemed to have problems of writing in English due to various factors. The paragraphs written by the targeted group seemed to lack the qualities stated above. The unique characteristics appeared to be rejected. The sentence level problems like fragmentation, comma splice, run on, dangling modifier, misplaced modifier, lack of parallelism and subject verb agreement, awkward beginning and wordiness seemed to be immense among students.

It has widely been observed that students' paragraph also lacked the stated essential elements required of a good paragraph (Holliday, 1989). The program ITP 44 is hoped would have pedagogical significance of informing,

reminding, directing students and other stake holders about effective academic writing. The present project thus aimed at investigating the academic paragraph writing problems of these students and the underlying factors that caused the problems.

Methodology

Description of the study area

The study was conducted at The English and Foreign Language University (EFLU) in Hyderabad, India on the International Training Program (ITP) students. The University was established in 1958 by Indian government also called the Central Institute of English. The institute was then expanded in 1972 to include the teaching of foreign languages like French, Germany and Russia and took the name Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages. Later in 2006 it was upgraded and given University Status. Hence, its present name; The English and Foreign Language University (EFLU). EFLU offers academic programmers in English, Arabic, French, German, Japanese, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Persian, Turkish, Chinese, Korean and Hindi. The programs are conducted at Certificate, Bachelore, Masters and PhD levels.

International Training Program (ITP) is one program provided at certificate level by the University for 44th Round by June 20 13. This program which is

sponsored by the Minister of External Affairs, GOI, under ITEC/SCAAP program provides training by grouping students in to three groups of basic, intermediate and advanced levels. Students from different part of the world where English is used as a second or foreign language are assigned to one of the group based on the entrance examinations conducted by the University at the beginning of the program. The program is a 12 weeks English language training which focuses on the four principal language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and the two forms (grammar and vocabulary).

Design, participants and sampling technique

The project employed a descriptive survey research design, and the participants were 2013 June entrants Intermediate level Progress to Proficiency ITP students of The EFLU Hyderabad campus. There exists an obvious variation in the student's socio-cultural setting. Their level of education ranges from minimum of TVET certificate to Bachelor degree. The group is a mixed age group that ranged from a minimum of twenty one to a maximum of fifty. The students' respective countries also differ in its language policy, teaching method, approaches, techniques and strategies of teaching English.

The course participants (22 in number) were taken as the study sample in order to give chance of representation for students from the different countries which includes;

Niger, Ghana, Yemen, Indonesia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, Palestine Lesotho and Ivory Coast.

Data collection tools and procedure

Analysis of the paragraph written by the participants, questionnaire and semi-structured interview were used to collect the data. First the paragraph written by each student about their study tour organized by the university were collected and analyzed. The students paragraph were analyzed focusing on mechanics problems like punctuation, capitalization and diction; general features; sentence level problems and paragraph level problems. A questionnaire with both open and close ended questions was then administered to the participants. Interview was then conducted with the students writing skill teacher at EFLU.

Data analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data analyses methods were employed.. The simple percentage calculation was adopted for the quantitative data from the analysis of the students' paragraph and the close ended questions. Responses were calculated and provided in tables. The qualitative data from the students' paragraphs, open ended questions and the interview were discussed under their respective themes.

Limitation of the study

The duration of the training and sample size of participants on country basis is considered a limitation.

Result and Interpretation

The result of the study are presented and discussed under five headings that include mechanics and word level problems, general features and sentence level problems, paragraph level problems, background of participants and factors responsible for the writing problems.

Mechanics and word level problems

Table1: Mechanics of writing

SN	Competence	Paragraph analysis	Students Response			
			Usually	Sometimes	Undecided	Rarely
1	Spelling	81.81	18.18	54.54	9.09	18.18
2	Punctuation	100	36.36	36.36	9.09	18.18
3	Capitalization	36.36		36.36	9.09	45.45
4	Diction	81.81	9.09	81.81		9.09
5	Grammar	90.90	45.45	45.46		18.18

The study results showed that majority of the students (81.81 %) had made spelling errors on the analyzed paragraphs; while 72.7% of the participating students also reported that they at least some times make spelling and punctuation mistakes (Table 1). The teacher interviewed had mentioned spelling as one of the major problem students encountered.

The analysis also indicated that all students had made punctuation errors on the analyzed paragraphs. Problem such as using comma faultily such as in separating two words or phrases and two independent clauses, rejecting comma and full stop where they are required, using question mark wrongly, using semi-colon to separate words, using apostrophe erroneously and others punctuation problems were clearly observed.

The students' paragraph analysis also portrait the students (36.5%) had capitalization errors like using lower case 'the' at the beginning of sentence and using uppercase at the middle, writing the pronoun I and place name like India ,Jaipur and Taj Mahal in lower cases.

Thirty six percent of the students sometimes had capitalization problems.

Moreover, majority of the students (81.81 %) had word choice problems (Table 1). Using words wrongly like in using "viewed" for visited, "done" for organized, "jump" for ride, "listened" for heard , "moved" for went,

"powerful" for impressive and using words which are synonymous in certain context like the word s "wonder" and "historical" as different were commonly observed. Moreover, using the same words very frequently and using less descriptive words was also noticed. More than 80% of the participants also rated that they at least sometimes have word choice problem. The interviewed teacher had said that the *students don't read enough and thus have word constraints.*

As also depicted on table 1, 90.9% of the students' paragraphs have grammar problems. These problems include wrong usage of articles, wrong usage and rejection of proposition, using present tense for past action ,neglecting of subject and main verb, number, affixation, word order, pronoun usage and soon. Moreover, 45.45% of the students also marked that they usually make grammar errors when they write. The other 45.5% also indicated that they sometime have such errors. The interviewed teacher also cited grammar as a major problem of the students.

General Features and Sentence Level Problems

The general features and sentence level problems are presented in Table 2. The result showed that 63.63% of the students' paragraphs have formality problems. They use colloquial words like "really nice", "I mean ... , "sweet place", "truly", "Gate "for

Indian Gate, "fun", "ha!" and soon. ?" and others were also identified. Asking question like "what can I say ...

Table 2: General features and sentence level problems of the participants

SN	Features	Paragraph analysis	Students Response			
			Usually	Sometimes	Undecided	Rarely
1	Formality	63.63	27.27	45.45	9.09	18.81
2	Objectivity	90.9				
3	Precision	81.81	18.18	54.54		
4	Responsibility					
5	Complexity	90.9	18.81	72.72		9.09
6	Wordiness	81.81				
7	Awkwardness	63.6				
8	Fragmentation	54.5				
9	Run-on	36.4				
10	Misplaced modifier	36.4				

Twenty seven percent of the students also marked that they usually have problem of using informal expressions in their writings where as the other 45.45% indicated that they sometimes have such problem. Likewise 90.9% of the students' paragraph also lacked objectivity. They are totally limited to subjective experiences and expressions like pronouns I, you and we.

Also 90.9% of the students' writings are grammatical and lexical less complex and less varied. The paragraphs are written in simple, uniform grammatical structure and common every day words and expressions. The study also shows that the students' writings are full of faulty constructions. About 82% of the paragraphs have wordiness problems

(Table 2). "Study tour is a thing organized by ... ", "you get exhausted but one thing is certain. You will never get bored", "Food and water were available in sweat ways restaurants offered tastily foods", " A famous building or a famous monument", "Delhi attracted us also by its beautiful monuments. These monuments are also good looking what made us take many pictures "and others are examples of wordy extract from the paragraphs.

Moreover, 63.6% of the paragraphs have also awkward beginnings sentences. For instance, "you can't believe me if I say study tour is the best event in my life", "It is why on Monday 29 we went on ... " and many others are awkward begging extracts from the paragraphs. Fragmentation

was also identified in 54.54% of the paragraphs. "Especially in Delhi I visited Taj Mahal", " I ask myself.", "Water a little cold", "That was the feeling I got in Delhi, Agra and Jaipur" were some of the fragmented expressions in the paragraphs. Fragmentation can thus be considered as another paragraph writing problem of the students.

Run on sentences like, "Duration is five days we travelled a lot of places in Delhi" where two independent clauses are combined without any punctuation mark and conjunction is observed in 36.4% of the paragraphs. Similarly 36.4% of the writings also have misplaced/dangling modifier problem such as the one in the sentence, "It has like Delhi; many attractive places".

Paragraph Level Problems

Table 3: Paragraph writing problems of the participants

SN	Features	Paragraph analysis	Students Response			
			Usually	Some times	Undecided	Rarely
1	Coherence/Organization	72.72	9.02	63.63	9.02	18.81
2	Completeness	72.72	27.27	45.45	9.02	18.81
3	Unity	63.63		72.72	9.02	18.81
4	Cohesion! (Explicitness)	63.63	27.27	54.54	9.02	9.02

As shown in Table 3, 72.7% of the paragraphs have serious organization problems. Sentences are usually jumbled. Ideas and sentences which call for chronological, logical and other ordering are mostly disorganized. More than 70% of the students also marked that they have at least sometimes problem of arranging sentences in to paragraph. Moreover, the interviewed teacher stated, "*They (the students) have no sense of a paragraph, and organization is their main problem.*"

Seventeen two percent of the paragraphs written by the participants had completeness problem. Details, facts and figures were neglected.

Twenty seven percent of the students also marked that they usually have problem of producing idea, and the other 45.54% rated that they sometimes have such problem.

As also shown on table 3, 63.6 % of the students' paragraphs lacked unity. More than one idea is usually entertained in the paragraphs. Also 72.7 % of the students marked that they have the problem of including only one idea in a paragraph. It can thus be concluded that unity is one of the students' writing problem.

Similarly, majority of the students' paragraphs (63.6%) have cohesion

problems. Some of the sentences are not linked, others are linked only by only few type of cohesive devices like the article "the "and pronouns like "it" and "we". The other cohesive devices like linking words, lexical cohesion,

and repetition of the important words were neglected. More than 80% of the students also rated that they at least sometimes have the problem of linking sentences into paragraph.

Background of the participants

Table 4: Stage at which participants become exposed to English and Sentence/paragraph writing

Grade	Beginning of learning English	English as a medium of instruction	Sentence writing starting time	Paragraph writing starting time	Good paragraph writing stage	Essay writing
Kindergarten (KG)	9.0	9.0				
1	18.0	9.0	9.0		9.0	
5	9.0			9.0		
9	18.8	36.4	18.8			
10	9.0	9.0		18.8		
12	9.0		9.0		18.8	
University	18.8	18.8	27.3	27.3	18.8	27.3
On the training			18.8	36.4	36.4	27.3
I don't know		9.0				18.8
Others		18.8			9.0	

The result showed that only 9.02% of participant started learning English at kindergarten and only 18.81 % at grade one. Majority of the participant started learning English at high school, while 18.8% had started at the university and or college level. This indicated the late learning of English by the participants in the study (Table 4).

As also shown on the table, only 18.81 % of the participant attended school where English is used as medium of instruction starting from grade one. For majority (63.63%) English is used as medium of instruction only at high school and university. For some (18.81 %) it is not used as instructional medium at all.

As shown in table 4 only 9.02% of the participant had learned sentence writing at grade 1. The other 36.36% started at high school whereas about 30% started at university. About 20% of them indicated that they only started on the present ITP program. Likewise, only 9.02% started learning about paragraph writing at grade 5. The other 36.36% indicated that they learned such thing only on this training while the other 27.27% marked that they started at university or college. The remaining 18.81 % started at grade 12. Twenty seven point two five percent have started writing essay type English exams only at University or college while the other 27.25% started on the present training. The other 18.81 % started only at grade 12. The interviewed

teacher also mentioned lack of formal systematized instruction on writing as

a factor for the students writing failure.

Factors for the writing problems

Table 5. Factors responsible for writing problems by the participants

S/No	Factors	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	Teachers teaching motivation		45.5		45.5	9.0
2	Low motivation for learning English		9.0	27.3	45.5	18.8
3	Frequent use of mother tongue in English class	18.8	36.4	27.3	9.0	
4	Inadequate paragraph writing practices	18.8	63.6	9.0	9.0	
5	Teachers low English language proficiency	18.8	36.4	18.8	9.0	18.8
6	Student poor command in English	18.8	45.5	9.0	27.3	
7	Low value attached to teaching English in my country	27.3	18.8	36.4	9.0	9.0
8	Low value attached to writing in English in my country	36.4	18.8	36.4	9.0	
9	Inadequate paragraph writing exercises on English textbooks used in school attended	9.0	72.7	9.0		

Table 5 showed that 45.54% of the students rated that their pervious English language teachers' lack of motivation of teaching is a factor for their writing failure though 54.54% of them disagreed with this point. This implies that teachers' lack of motivation of teaching is one factor for writing failure of some of the students.

However, only 9.02% of the students agreed with the statement that their lack of motivation of learning English was a factor for their writing problems, indicating that the students' lack of motivation cannot be considered as a factor for the student's writing failure. More than 60% of the respondents also indicated that their poor command over the English

language is a factor for their writing problems although 27.27% disagreed to the point. The teacher also cited that the students' command of language was one factor for the failure.

About 55% of the participants also indicated that their previous English language teachers' lack of proficiency is responsible for their writing problems. Hence teachers' lack of proficiency over English can thus be one factor for the paragraph writing failures of at least some of the students.

More than half (54.5%) of the students had reported the frequent use of mother tongue in English language classroom as a factor for their writing problems while 9.0 % disagreed (Table

5). Therefore, the frequent use of mother tongue can be labeled as one factor for the writing difficulty of students. Result also showed that 45.5% of the participants marked that less value assigned for teaching English in their country is one factor responsible for their writing difficulty and only 9.02 % disagreed. Similarly, 54.54% of the participants also mentioned less value assigned for teaching writing in English in their country as another reason for writing failure. At the same time only 18.81% disagreed with the second point. Hence it can be inferred that the value assigned to both teaching English and teaching writing skills are factors for the students writing problems.

More specifically, 72.72% of the participants rated the inadequacy of writing exercises in their previous English language classroom as a factor for their writing failure. Only 9.02% of the students disagreed with this point. Majority of the students (81.81%) also marked inadequacy of paragraph writing exercises on English language text books used in school attended. No student disagreed with this point. Hence, inadequacy of writing exercise in their previous English language classroom in general and paragraph writing exercises on their previous English language text books in particular are among the factors for the students writing failure.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, students' had problems of spelling,

punctuations; particularly in using comma, diction (word choice) and grammar, especially in using articles, prepositions, and tenses. Capitalization, formality, objectiveness, and complexity (qualities that characterize a good academic composition) problems were also observed. On paragraph writing; sentence level problems such as wordiness, awkward beginning, and fragmentation was a major problem. Paragraph level qualities like coherence, completeness, cohesion and unity were lacking, while run on and misplaced (dangling) modifier problems was commonly observed.

Late starting of learning English and more importantly very late practice and writing in English and English as medium of instruction, students' poor language command, frequent use of mother tongue in English language classroom, and inadequate writing practices on English language text books used in schools were all factors responsible for students' academic paragraph writing problems and failure.

The English language teachers' lack of English proficiency and motivation in some cases also underline the writing failures of some students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, the following suggestions are proffered Students should be encouraged to work hard towards understanding the features of good academic paragraph writing through

consistent practice. The countries of the respective students could do more by way of revising their English language policy, curriculum as well as text book where they have been identified as the problem. This will enhance the country citizen English language proficiency, and academic writing in particular.

English language teachers should give room for more practical academic writing and take proactive measures against the possible wash back effect of their exams; in other words, to give more performance writing tests and evaluation should address important elements in academic writing.

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