

EXPLORING CHALLENGES IN UNITY AND COHERENCE IN PARAGRAPH WRITING BY ESL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

In this study, unity and coherence errors in a paragraph by ESL learners are explored at undergraduate level in Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan. The main purpose of this study was to explore what kind of errors of unity and coherence in a paragraph are made by undergraduate students in Pakistan. Mix method was used to conduct this study. In this study, interviews from the students and their writeups were taken for data collection. The data was analyzed thematically. The findings show that there are many unity and coherence errors in students' paragraph writing. They were unable to write properly organized paragraphs as their paragraphs lack unity and coherence. This study concluded that ESL students make many mistakes in writing a paragraph. It is suggested that students need to read, practice and get feedback daily from the instructors.

Keywords: unity, coherence, errors, paragraph, writing

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Introduction

Writing skills are considered as a productive skill people use to communicate their views, thoughts, ideas, and experiences. Both non-native and native speakers find writing as a difficult skill as they come across multiple issues such as purpose, appropriate content, grammar, punctuation, parts of speech, spelling, capitalization, vocabulary, organization and proper arrangement of the text (Abu Rass, 2015). Moreover, Bowker (2007) stated that writing plays an important role in our everyday life. For instance, we can write to our friends who are far away from us, write reports, applications, memorandums, send messages through mobile phones, etc. Deep understanding of a language is possible through writing (Raimes, 1983). Learning writing includes many areas

of English linguistics such as structure, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and grammar rules.

Writing skill, as well as reading, listening and speaking, in English language has always been a great issue for ESL learners. For example, Asma and Radia (2017) stated that writing includes planning, practice, reflection, organization of thoughts, and feedback. The most difficult and desired skill to have is the ability to write coherently in English, as written English demands a higher level of proficiency from its users (Alqasham, et al., 2021). Moreover, Alwafa et al. (2023) stated that writing is an increasingly complex ability for both non-native and native English speakers since it's a prerequisite for the English writing courses.

In university, writing is an indispensable learning part as students write many things throughout the degree program. For instance, their exam is mainly in written form. They cannot go through the course without having expertise in writing (Brown, 2000). Students' performance is evaluated at all levels of learning in writing (Afrin, 2016). Students need to learn writing effectively because it is involved in almost all kinds of exams.

While learning writing skills, students learn other aspects of language in depth because learning writing skills requires a lot of struggle and hard work. Writing is considered as one of the most difficult skills (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013). Moreover, Kukurs (2012) states that even native speakers struggle to present error free writing. It is difficult for ESL Learner to write error free piece of writing because he has been given very short time for writing practice, and he is also foreigner to writing as compared to native speaker. Therefore, there are many chances of making numerous mistakes in English composition.

Concerning the issues mentioned in the writing encountered by ESL writers. Therefore, this study focuses on the challenges students encounter in unity and coherence while writing a paragraph. Writing errors made by Pakistani students at the level of under graduation in unity and coherence in a paragraph and to suggest some solutions for young learners.

Problem Statement

ESL students need language writing skills ranging from simply writing paragraphs and summary to essay and big report and professional writing skills (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). Moreover, Aragon (2013) declares non-native and native speakers consider writing as a difficult skill among all four skills of English language. There are many reasons behind difficulty in writing such as lack of writing practice, interest, proper guidance and many more.

I, as a teacher, have observed that students are never willing to write in class as well as out of class. They do not give priority to writing until they are compelled to write. When they write, they make numerous mistakes in composition. All subjects are taught in English language except Sindhi and Urdu, as regional language, students struggle a lot to improve writing skills to produce error free piece of writing.

The following questions are answered in this study:

1. What challenges do ESL students encounter in unity and coherence in writing a paragraph at university level?
2. What are the solutions to overcome unity and coherence errors in a paragraph writing?

Literature review

Writing

All researchers perceive writing differently as per their experience, knowledge, and understanding power. For instance, Nunan (2002) considers writing as cognitive and extremely complex activity which requires demonstrating the control of many variables at the same time. Similarly, Kellogg (2001) defines writing as cognitive process in which memory and verbal communication are involved. Moreover, Horvath (2001) is of the view that writing is complex activity involving planned ideas. It is a process in which self-regulation and attentional control are required. Troyka and Nudelman (1999) state that writing does not mean holding a pen and started writing whatever pops in your mind, but it involves certain steps and careful thinking to complete the process of writing. Moreover, Flower and Hayes (1980) considered writing as a skill which demands full planning, process, and generating ideas in the shape of a composition.

Writing in second language

There is always a great difference between native and non-native writers. Native writers have one language in mind while composing any piece of writing whereas, non-native/ second language learners have mother tongue influence on a new language. Therefore, L2 learners face various issues in writing in a foreign language. Sometimes, they translate from native language to foreign language and sometimes, they do not find appropriate words and expressions to convey their message in the target language.

Wang and Wen (2002:225) state that L1 and L2 writing process is different as L2 writers have more than one language at their disposal. While writing in L2, they may use both L1 and L2 for cognitive operations. Researchers have not given attention to the difference between L1 and L2 writers. Consequently, L2 writing aspects are misunderstood. L2 writers, whether skilled or unskilled, while composing a piece of writing, switch between L1 and L2 to generate a good text. As many researchers have suggested that L2 writers use L1 for generating a text (Cumming, 1989; Jones & Tetroe, 1987), convert their native knowledge to a foreign language (Edelsky, 1982; Friedlander, 1990; Lay, 1982). To sum up, L2 writers always use L1 while composing in L2 context. They think of a sentence in their L1 and then they translate it into L2. This is clear that there is a great influence of L1 on L2.

Paragraph Writing

Wali & Madani (2020) states that paragraph structure is important to consider when it comes to the arrangement and structure of a document. Oshima and Hogue (1999:17) defined a paragraph as a fundamental unit of organization where some sentences are grouped for one main idea. Moreover, Philline, (2015) states that in a paragraph, one main idea is generated and supported with examples and evidence. It has three parts. Main idea, body, and conclusion. All these parts go around a single idea, the length of the paragraph varies, it can be prolonged as much as writer can have ideas on that single idea. In the beginning, it is indented and ends at the dot. Zemach and Rumisek (2003:1) describe a paragraph as a combination of sentences about one idea. These above-mentioned definitions of a paragraph as a group of sentences revolving around a single idea. In a paragraph, all the sentences discuss the main idea. From the above definitions, it can be deduced that all the sentences focus on one main idea.

Elements of Paragraph

Nunan (2002) states that some elements determine whether a paragraph has a quality or not. That is, unity, coherence and development are essential parts of a good paragraph. Moreover, Walker (2010) is of the view that a good paragraph has five elements such as unity, support, coherence, sentence skill and purpose.

Unity of Paragraph

Oshima and Hogue (1999) stated that unity in the paragraph means one main idea is supported with examples. All supporting sentences in a paragraph should be linked with the main idea. If any irrelevant sentence is given in supporting detail it will be omitted. Any information not relevant to the topic sentence should be avoided. Clearly, a paragraph should include unity, support, and coherence in a way that includes all points relevant to the topic sentence. In short, unity in a paragraph means connections of all supporting sentences with the topic sentence.

To sum up, unity in a paragraph means all supporting detail should be given according to topic sentence. According to Alice and Patricia (2005), a paragraph has a topic sentence that is supported by at least three supporting details and one concluding sentence which is a restatement of a topic sentence. The use of paragraph unity and coherence is something we must consider when writing about our thoughts and feelings (Putri, 2023).

Coherence in Paragraph

Birthous (2011) characterizes coherence as the logical connection of ideas within a text, facilitating the creation of meaning and ensuring that the reader can clearly grasp the intended message. Altenberg, (1987) defines it as connection of meaning within sentences according to the knowledge of a writer. Adelstein & Pival (1980) stated that when series of sentences develop the main idea it means it is coherent paragraph. For readers' understanding, the paragraph needs to be written in a coherent way like meaning is clear, there is a proper flow of ideas by using proper transitional words so that meaning is clear to the readers. McCrimmon (1967) is of the view that a paragraph is said to be coherent if all parts are set together which give clear meaning to the readers without much struggle. In summary, all parts of a paragraph give clear meaning to the readers. Coherence refers to meaning which is achieved through unity. Everything is linked together to give clear meaning to the readers.

Achievement of Coherence

The text is coherent if readers understand the meaning of it. For this, there should be unity in the text. If the writer alters the central idea or unity within a paragraph, it may lead to confusion, making it difficult for the reader to interpret the intended message. To achieve coherence within a paragraph, the writer should follow the main ideas. To give clear meaning to the readers main idea should be supported with proper supporting detail. Oshima and Hogue (1999:40) are of the view that for coherence within a paragraph the writer needs to go smoothly from one sentence to another sentence with clear meaning. The writer should not jump from one idea to another all sudden. All sentences should flow smoothly. Oshima & Hogue (2006) suggested ways to achieve coherence:

Key Words Repetition

To achieve coherence, repeating keywords is considered as one of the important techniques for achieving coherence. For having focus on the main ideas, repeating words or phrases in a text plays an important role. Maria, (2015) states that repeating key words and phrases is very important for coherence in the paragraph. The readers are attentive and focused due to repetition of key words. For repetition of key words, there are no set rules. But the writer needs to avoid too much repetition because it will be monotonous and boring.

Using Consistent Pronouns

Another effective way to bring coherence to the paragraph is to use pronouns instead of nouns. An important factor in using pronouns is to bring consistency. Maria (2015) asserts that coherence in a paragraph can be achieved through two main strategies: ensuring a smooth flow of sentences by avoiding awkward repetition of nouns and maintaining consistency in the use of pronouns.

Using Transition Signals to Link Ideas

Another important way to bring coherence in a paragraph is to use transition words or linking words. These words work as a bridge between ideas. These words will help the reader to understand the text. The reader will easily understand what is said and what will be said. These words are linked to the proper flow of ideas. They work as road signs, as drivers face a lot of problems without these signs, so do the readers face problems without transition words in the text.

Arranging Ideas in Logical Orders

Any text is understandable if it is arranged in logical order. There are mainly two ways of arranging a text. Firstly, the Chronological order in which a text is organized according to date and sequence of events, first thing first. Secondly, Emphatic order in which the most important things are given at the end. Smooth flow of sentences in a text is the result of sequentially arranged sentences. In addition, the reader tries to understand the text by using his/her background information.

Methodology

In this part of study, method of study, sample, population and tools of data collection are used to describe the research methodology.

Method of Study

A descriptive analytical approach is adopted in this study.

Population of Study

In this study, the population is undergraduate students from different departments of the university. A total of 100 students, aged between 20 and 23, speak Urdu and Sindhi as their first languages and English as a foreign language.

Sample of Study

- a) 100 ESL students' paragraphs write-ups were selected for a representative sample.
- b) 20 students' semi-structured interviews were conducted for collecting data.

Data Collection Tools

For data collection, two tools were used i.e. students' write-ups and semi-structured interviews from students.

Findings

This chapter presents the data collection process and the results of the data analysis. It highlights the errors made by students in maintaining unity and coherence in paragraph writing.

Students' Interviews

In this study, semi-structured interviews were collected from 20 participants for the purpose of collecting data. The interview questions were analyzed and then presented thematically.

Exploring Challenges in English Writing

Students face problems in selecting a topic, beginning to write a paragraph, giving proper supporting ideas, collecting ideas on a particular topic, grammar, vocabulary, and text organization.

Participants responded like:

- S 1: Sir, when topics are not given, we face a big problem of selecting a topic for writing a paragraph.
- S 2: opening a paragraph was one of the many challenges during paragraph writing sir.
- S 9. Sir, I face problems with grammar, vocabulary and construction of sentences effectively.
- S 20. I most of the time face the challenge of organizing ideas in my writing. I make various mistakes in organization.
- S 24. I always face problems with punctuating sentences.

Analyzing Root Causes of Writing Challenges

Participants shared that their main problems were lack of opportunities of reading and writing in the class lack of quality in earlier education, only traditional methods, outdated course outline, and finally, difficulty in the English language itself.

- S 3: Sir, the big problem is reading insufficiently in the class.
- S 5: sir this is the way we have been taught English in the early classes and lack of practice in the class.
- S 6: for vocabulary, we need to study other books because reading books will be useful for enhancing vocabulary and knowledge.
- S 12: Sir, our teachers taught us just overview of the grammar but there was no deep study of grammar that is why we are facing issues these days.
- S 19: Sir, the main reason is lack of practice.

Strategies for Overcoming Writing Challenges

Participants responded that practice, help from the teacher, quality education from the beginning, practical aspects of learning, command of vocabulary, teaching methods, reading practice, extra time to writing, etc. are the most effective ways for improving writing.

S 1: sir, the first step is to practice more and more and then teachers should also use new ways and activities for effective teaching and their method of teaching should be from easy to difficult.

S 2: Three things are important i.e. reading, practice and feedback from students and teachers.

S 3: Online reading, book reading and focus on vocabulary improvement.

S 13: Sir, reading is the most important part for successful writing. So before writing anything reading is mandatory.

S 16: Sir, for writing improvement reading plays an important role. Therefore, reading should be necessary.

Identifying Specific Paragraph Writing Issues

Participants faced problems in selecting a topic, beginning a paragraph, giving proper supporting ideas, giving suitable examples, concluding paragraphs, organization, vocabulary, and syntax.

S 2: Sir, I face problems in the opening of the paragraph whenever I start writing a paragraph.

S 3: Sir, the big problem I face is to give relevant supporting details according to the main idea.

S 7: Sir, selecting a topic sentence is a big problem for me when I write a paragraph.

S 16: In writing paragraphs, I face various problems like lack of ideas and knowledge.

S 18: Sir, two problems I face in writing are organization and supporting details.

Enhancing Writing Skills: Methods and Practices

Participants were of the view that improving writing skill needs a lot of reading, practice, pre-writing techniques, feedback from friends, teachers, reading novels, books, magazines, listening to online lectures, and watching videos.

S 3: Teachers' timely feedback and self-practice are necessary.

S 4: Sir, sometimes, we need to get help from our classmates with how to write a paragraph and self-practice is necessary.

S 8: I improved my writing through reading magazines, novels, books, and many things from the internet.

S 11: I will improve my writing with the help of teachers and reading books, articles, and magazines.

S 13: Sir, writing more and more is important for improving writing skills.

Activities for Developing Writing Proficiency

Participants shared that different activities are done in the class like online quizzes, Kahoot, read theory, online practice, notes of the teacher for getting information, daily practice, group activities, class competition for writing etc.

S 4: Online practice like Kahoot and Read theory. There are so many passages for reading comprehensions on Read Theory.

S 5: Sir, teachers give us different topics and notes for improving our writing skills. We read their notes and practice writing.

S 7: Sir, in class we do many activities like reading, writing, in writing we do prewriting like free writing, clustering, and many more activities like this.

S 11: We do activities like reading articles from books and do online activities like we use Kahoot in class for solving online quizzes based on the internet. Kahoot is very useful to do activities online.

S 19: sir, we write a lot for improving writing skills. Sometimes, we follow teachers' instructions and sometimes based on their feedback we rewrite.

Key Findings

Students are unable to select a topic for paragraph writing, they face problem in beginning the paragraph, writing a topic sentence, giving adequate supporting detail with examples and evidence, writing conclusion sentence, organization of a paragraph, using transition words appropriately, spelling of borrowed words in the English language. They also face problems with grammar, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics.

The reasons behind these difficulties are lack of interest of students, lack of appropriate activities in the course, lack of teachers' interest in teaching writing, and lack of encouraging environment in the class. Lack of teachers' training.

Finally, during the interview, the following points were highlighted:

1. Participants didn't have good language proficiency.
2. Lack of willingness to write.
3. Inadequate time given to reading by students.
4. Least time given to writing practice.
5. They faced issues in all parts of speech.
6. They could not use auxiliary verbs properly.
7. The issue of getting information on a single topic.
8. Inappropriate supporting details.
9. Less time was allocated to writing practice, as they mainly focused course completion.
10. Lack of confidence.

Students' Written Scripts

There were 100 participants at the undergraduate level from different departments of the university. Corder's (1967) method of Error Analysis was used to analyze the data. It has three steps: 1. Sample error collection. 2. Error Identification. And 3. Error Description. For assessment of participants' errors.

In this study, out of four principles, only the first two principles of the study are used to assess students' written scripts.

Topic Sentences

According to assessment of participants' written scripts, 53 students cannot write a topic sentence correctly. As illustrated on the Table: 1.

Table 1: Topic Sentence

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NO	47	47.0	47.0	47.0
	Yes	53	53.0	53.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

This shows that 52% of the participants are unable to give proper supporting detail as is expected according to the topic sentence as far as unity is concerned.

Table 2: Proper Supporting Sentences

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NO	48	48.0	48.0	48.0
	Yes	52	52.0	52.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

This figure shows that 52% of the participants are unable to write concluding sentence as it is demanded according to unity of a paragraph.

Table 3: Relevant Concluding Sentence

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NO	48	48.0	48.0	48.0
	Yes	52	52.0	52.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Body paragraphs

Writers suggest that there should be at least three supporting details along with evidence and examples in a body paragraph. Around 57% were not able to write proper supporting details.

Table 4: Supporting Detail with Examples

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NO	43	43.0	43.0	43.0
	Yes	57	57.0	57.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

In table no.4.5 around 59% of students are unable to give proper and relevant supporting sentences.

Table 5: Relevant Supporting Sentences

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NO	41	41.0	41.0	41.0
	Yes	59	59.0	59.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Findings

According to the first two principles of John Langan, students' written scripts were assessed. In the first principle, Unity, students made various mistakes. They were unable to write proper topic sentences with supporting details which are expected according to topic sentence. The second principle, Support, demands at least three supporting details with suitable examples, evidence, and proofs as expected in topic sentence. Most of the students were unable to follow these two principles of writing.

Learner Oriented

Students were not motivated.

Students gave less time to reading books and newspapers.

They mainly focused on rote learning.

Regional languages were switched randomly.

English was taught as a subject rather than a language.

To summarize this study, it can be concluded that students make numerous mistakes in writing a paragraph. Among all, the topmost sever problems are in unity and coherence of a paragraph. They are unable to write a topic sentence properly. They are not able to give proper supporting details. They write something in the topic sentence but when they start writing supporting detail, they are diverted to another supporting detail which is against the principle of unity. They also make mistakes in supporting detail. Their supporting evidence and examples are not appropriate. Sometimes their supporting detail is invalid and sometimes their examples are not relevant.

Conclusion

Research questions, objectives, findings and summary and recommendations are given this chapter.

Research Questions

The following questions are answered in this study:

1. What challenges do Pakistani ESL university students face in unity and coherence in paragraph writing?
2. What are the possible solutions for the students to cope with errors of unity and coherence in paragraph writing?

Summary of the Findings

According to research questions of the study, findings are given below:

Findings the first research question through interview and students' write ups are that students face problems in writing a paragraph is to write a topic sentence. As 52% of the students are unable to write a proper topic sentence. They are unaware of writing a topic sentence. They also face challenges to bring unity in a paragraph. They cannot find suitable supporting details according to the topic sentence main ideas. The second problem they encounter is giving supporting details. They are unable to give three supporting details along with suitable examples and evidence.

The third problem they faced is the use of all parts of speech in their writings. The fourth problem they faced is the format of the paragraph which is one three one.

Summary

From the students' written scripts, it can be summarized that they are weak in many areas of writing. They made many mistakes in writing. They made grammatical errors, parts of speech errors, errors in unity and support of a paragraph. They also made errors in subject and verb agreement, fragment sentence, spellings like singular and plural verbs, order of words, format of a paragraph, double negative, double words, homophones, homonyms, capitalization, use of helping verbs, and many more.

Recommendation for Students

These recommendations will help the readers and researchers to write error-free paragraphs.

1. Foreign language learners should attend seminars and conversation clubs to enrich their vocabulary.
2. Students should read before submitting any piece of writing.
3. Foreign language learners should write a daily diary that will be helpful for them to improve their writing skills.
4. If any part of the lecture is not clear, students should raise their hand to ask the question to form the teacher.
5. Students should make a habit of reading books, novels, newspapers, notes, articles to explore more.

Guideline for writing a good paragraph

1. Topic sentences have two parts i.e. topic and main idea.
2. Use active voice in the paragraph.
3. For an idea use short sentences, for explanation and illustration use longer sentences.
4. Repeat key words.
5. Use a variety of sentences rather than monotonous sentences.
6. Vary your sentences.
7. Give priority to active voice.
8. Always use clear, concise and relevant paragraphs.
9. Daily, you should revise your work.
10. Write, revise, edit and rewrite your work.
11. Rewrite your paragraph according to the feedback of the teachers.

Guideline for researchers

1. All the researchers must read some books based on research before stepping into the ocean of the thesis.
2. They should always be in contact with the supervisor because the supervisor knows how the researcher is doing.
3. Researchers should always be motivated to research as it is a very difficult task for some researchers to continue their spirit of learning.
4. The researchers should know the ways they are going.
5. They should continuously read articles based on their thesis/dissertation.
6. The researcher's eyes should always be open to new information and the latest articles on the same topic.
7. They should learn in advance the whole process of thesis writing.

This study aimed to examine the challenges encountered by undergraduate students at Sukkur IBA University. The results indicate that students experience a range of difficulties related to unity and coherence within paragraphs. The reasons behind these problems can be methods of teachers teaching English to non-native speakers, syllabus, lack of students' interest in learning English language, difficulty in language itself and many more

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