

The Structure and Adequate Development of English as a Foreign Language Learners' Paragraphs: A Case Study

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Abstract

Developing complete paragraphs with appropriate structure is not easy for many EFL tertiary students. Thus, investigating the EFL students' paragraphs is needed in order to reveal the strengths and the weaknesses. This study explored how the students structured and completely developed the ideas of a paragraph. The data of the study were collected from the third semester students of Stikubank University (UNISBANK) Semarang, Indonesia. In analyzing the data, the sentences in the paragraphs were numbered for easy identification of the topic sentence, the supporting sentences, the concluding sentence. The completeness of paragraph development was revealed by examining how the supporting sentences developed the topic sentence. The study concludes that the EFL students under the study have problems with paragraph structure and paragraph development. Thirty percent of the students do not conclude or close their stand-alone paragraphs and merely 33% of the students are able to develop their paragraphs completely.

Keywords: paragraph, adequate development, EFL Learners

1. Background

This study was motivated by my observation as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher in Indonesia to find out the paragraph writing difficulties faced by my students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Very often I found incomplete paragraphs or paragraph fragments in my students' essays. The incomplete paragraphs that I found are among others the presence of excessive indentation, undeveloped topic sentence. Indentation of course does not make a paragraph. When one complete paragraph is given several indentations, disjointedness occurs. Undeveloped topic sentence may distract the readers because this incomplete paragraph reduces the continuity of ideas. These incomplete paragraphs of course will reduce the coherence of the essay since as stated by Rustipa (2013) that one of the properties of a coherent text is fullness of paragraph development. Thus, the lack of paragraph writing skills is one root of the problem to create a coherent text.

One of the goals of tertiary students to learn English is to write academic essays. Paragraphs are the building blocks of essays; thus, knowledge of paragraph structuring is badly needed in order to be able to produce coherent and readable essays. Gugin (2014) shares that the teaching and learning of academic writing lead to considerable anxiety for the teachers and the students. This is because accuracy and fluency are needed in the academic context besides style. That writing a longer text is not easy is understandable because writing is an art as stated by Khansir, Ahrami, Hajivandi (2013) that a writer is an artist. Therefore, they believe that writing is not easy even for a native speaker.

Fawcett (2013), Kirszner and Mandell (2011) as cited in Gugin (2014) argue that it might be more productive to view a paragraph as the basic unit of discourse, not a sentence or an essay. Thus, in teaching writing, a teacher can start with a paragraph and then move back to a sentence and forward to an essay. And based on this view, Gugin proposes a Paragraph-First Approach to the Teaching of Academic Writing. He further explains that he doesn't ignore the teaching of sentence-level grammar. But in academic writing lesson, it should be seen as secondary.

Based on the rationale mentioned above, this study investigated paragraph skills of tertiary students; i.e. third semester students of Stikubank University (UNISBANK) Semarang, academic year 2015/ 2016. This study more focused on the structure and the completeness of the EFL students' paragraph development. In other words, the main focus of this study was to explore the EFL students' paragraph development. It is important because a well-organized discourse can still be understood by the readers even though it is not free from grammatical errors.

On the other hand, poorly-organized discourse is difficult to be understood even though it is grammatically correct. Again, here I do not underestimate the role of grammar in writing because accuracy is needed from the very beginning.

Huan (2011) suggests that college teachers should not overlook grammar teaching while they are teaching writing. This is because the grammatical errors can interfere with communication. However, in academic course instruction, a writing teacher should focus more on paragraph level. The sentence-level grammar can be taught indirectly, i.e. teaching of sentence rule by doing. Ann Chin (2011) reminds the teacher to focus on flow of ideas in teaching sentence-level grammar by doing in which the teacher can use the strategies of sentence combining, sentence expansion. In this way, the students will learn that their language choices affect the message.

The research problems that were solved in this study can be formulated as follows: 1) How do the EFL students structure their paragraph?, 2) How is the main idea of the paragraph completely developed? Hopefully, the research results can be beneficial for EFL teachers, particularly for the writing teachers in teaching courses of Paragraph-Based Writing, Essay Writing, Academic Writing, etc.

Studies on EFL students' paragraphs had been done by applied linguists. Some related previous studies are summarized in the following. Rustipa's dissertation (2013) investigating 14 Indonesian professional writings found in *The Jakarta Post* revealed that most paragraphs in the 50% of the texts were incompletely developed.

Adu (2015) investigated the paragraphs written by polytechnic students in Ghana in terms of the structure of the paragraphs. The research findings showed that 66% of 79 essays employed definite paragraph format; i.e. started with a topic sentence followed by supporting sentences, while 34% of the essays had problems with paragraph development.

Khansir et.al. (2013) examined the errors in the paragraphs written by EFL learners in Iran at undergraduate level in terms of topic sentence, supporting sentence, supporting details and closing sentence. The research findings revealed that the largest number of errors committed by the students was in the supporting details, while the minimum number of error was in supporting sentence.

Marzban (2014) investigated the interrelationship between two literacy skills writing and reading. He attempted to find out whether teaching paragraph structure has any effect on the reading comprehension ability of EFL learners. The study concluded that teaching paragraph structure can increase the reading comprehension ability of EFL learners. This is because familiarity with main idea, supporting ideas, supporting details can guide readers in comprehending texts.

This study, like the previous studies, explored the structure of EFL learners' paragraphs. The difference is that it also examined how the main idea in the paragraph is developed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Meaning of Paragraph

Paragraph is a fundamental unit of a composition. There are various definitions of paragraph. Some definitions are presented as follows. Zemach and Rumisek (2003, 1) defines a paragraph as a group of sentences about a single topic. Together, the sentences of the paragraph explain the writer's main or most important idea. Birjandi, Alavi and Nodoushah (2004, 26) state that a paragraph is composed of some sentences and there is no strict rule for determining how many sentences you need in a paragraph. But you need to include as many sentences as the reader needs to understand the point of the paragraph fully.

Adu (2015) explains that a paragraph is a group of related sentences that discuss one main idea, the first sentence of which begins on a new line. The first sentence of a paragraph is usually indented (moved in) a few spaces. But in a fully blocked style of writing, the new line is not indented. From the definitions above it is clear that a paragraph is a piece of writing consisting of several sentences which discuss one main subject. The sentences are closely related like a family in which the members are related. Each member has different role or function.

Good paragraphs have some characteristics in common. They are coherence and fullness of development. Reid (2000: 116) says that coherence means "to stick together". A paragraph is coherent if: 1) parts of the paragraph are unified, i.e. when all the supporting sentences relate to the topic sentence; 2) the paragraph seems logical to the reader. And a paragraph is complete when it has all the supporting sentences it needs to fully explain the topic sentence and all the minor supporting sentences it needs to explain each major supporting sentence.

2.2. The Structure of Paragraph

A paragraph is analogous to an essay meaning that it has introduction, body and conclusion. The introduction is the topic sentence; the body is the supporting sentences; the conclusion is the supporting sentence. So paragraphs have a very specific organizational pattern. It means that all paragraphs are put together in a similar way. A paragraph has three major structural parts: a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence.

Making topic sentence is the first step in writing a paragraph. The subject of a paragraph is formulated in a topic sentence; thus, the topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph. It is the most general statement in a paragraph. Oshima and Hogue (2006) explain that a topic sentence not only names the topic of the paragraph, but it also limits the topic to one or two areas that can be discussed completely in the space of a single paragraph. It also tells the audience about the purpose of the paragraph. That is, the topic sentence tells the audience what ideas to expect in the paragraph.

A topic sentence can be simple or complex. Juzwiak (2009) explains that simple topic sentence only states the topic of the paragraph without mentioning the sub ideas. Thus, simple topic sentence can make the writer to write anything concerning what he/ she thinks of the topic. Oshima and Hogue (2006) state that simple topic sentence is too general. Example: *English has been influenced by other languages.*

Juzwiak (2009) further explains that a complex topic sentence states the controlling idea together with its sub ideas. Reid (2000: 116) argues that a good topic sentence has two parts: the topic and the controlling idea. The topic is the subject of the paragraph. It is what we are writing about. The controlling idea limits the topic of our paragraph to the aspect of the topic that we want to explore in our paragraph, and it is also termed as a restricting statement. Thus, a good topic sentence is a complex topic sentence. Example: *It is very difficult to be alone in a foreign country.* The controlling ideas are *difficult, alone, foreign.*

Supporting sentences develop the topic sentence. That is, they explain the topic sentence by giving reasons, examples, facts, statistics, quotations, etc. In terms of organization, there are two types of supporting sentences: major supporting sentences and minor supporting sentences. The major supporting sentences are the main details that tell us about the topic sentence. These sentences directly write about the topic sentence. The minor supporting sentences tell us more about the major supporting sentences. It means that the relationship between major supporting sentences and the topic sentence is direct while the relationship between minor supporting sentences and the topic sentence is indirect.

The concluding sentence of a paragraph signals the end of the paragraph and leaves the reader with important points to remember. A concluding sentence serves three purposes as follows: 1) it signals the end of the paragraph, 2) it summarizes the main points of the paragraph, 3) it gives the final comment on the topic and leaves the reader with the most important ideas to think about.

2.3. Complete Paragraph

As in a sentence having theme and rheme or principal and subordinate ideas, a paragraph should have a proper proportion between the principal and subordinate ideas. The principal idea of a paragraph is flowed in an opening sentence called a topic sentence embodying the subject matter while the subordinate ideas are flowed in the following sentences called supporting sentences. The supporting sentences should reflect the topic sentence. By this way, unity in a paragraph is achieved. Any idea that does not address the topic breaks paragraph unity. However, unity itself cannot make a good paragraph. Another property to make a good paragraph is completeness or fullness.

The number of sentences in a paragraph is unimportant; however, the paragraph should be long enough to develop the main idea which is stated in the topic sentence. Reid (2000) explains that a paragraph is complete when it has all the supporting sentences it needs to fully explain the topic sentence and all the minor supporting sentences it needs to explain each major supporting sentence. Thus, a complete paragraph has paragraph structure and completely developed.

A paragraph can stand alone or belonging to a larger text. Unlike a stand-alone paragraph, a paragraph belonging to a larger text does not always require a topic sentence because the thesis statement of the essay clearly shows what the topic for each paragraph will be. A paragraph belonging to a larger text does not always require a concluding sentence because the essay conclusion will be put at the end of the essay. Very often, the last sentence of the paragraph functions as a bridge to the following paragraph (Boardman and Frydenberg, 2002: 97-98).

Bowman (2009) as cited in Adu (2015) argues that the complexity of the controlling idea and the reader's need for explanation determine the length of the paragraph. Thus, the length of a paragraph depends on the ideas stated in the topic sentence.

3. Method

This study investigated paragraph skills of the third semester students of Stikubank University (UNISBANK) Semarang, particularly how they structured their paragraphs and how complete they developed the controlling ideas in the topic sentence with accompanying supporting sentences. It mainly applied qualitative method in which the researcher interpreted the research results qualitatively by describing, explaining. In order to achieve the goal, the data collection and data analysis were employed.

3.1. Method of Data Collection

In collecting the data, the writer asked 30 students to write one paragraph with the theme: *Your opinion about reality show(s) on television*. The students were given 45 minutes to finish their paragraphs. During writing their paragraphs, they were not allowed to consult dictionary, to access internet, to have discussion with a friend. Thus, their work reflected their writing competence. All of the 30 paragraphs became the research data.

3.1. Method of Data Analysis

After the data had been collected, they were analyzed. To answer the first research question *How do the EFL students structure their paragraph?*, the sentences in the paragraphs were numbered for easy identification of the topic sentence, the supporting sentences, the concluding sentence(s). The data of the study were stand-alone paragraphs; thus, a paragraph was said to have a complete structure if it had topic sentence, supporting sentences, concluding sentence(s).

To answer the second research question *How is the main idea of the paragraph completely developed?*, I examined the development of a topic sentence. A paragraph was classified as complete when it had all the supporting sentences it needed to fully explain the topic sentence and all the minor supporting sentences it needed to explain each major supporting sentence.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Findings

The research found out that 19 paragraphs (63%) employed the complete structure of 1) topic sentence, 2) supporting sentences, 3) concluding sentences. The other 11 paragraphs (37%) did not have conclusion meaning that they only employed 1) topic sentence, 2) supporting sentences. Concerning the complete ideas development, the research found out that merely 10 paragraphs (33%) were fully or completely developed while the other 20 paragraphs (67%) were incompletely developed.

4.2. Discussion

The finding that 63% of the students employed definite format of paragraph structure means that EFL students of UNISBANK have fair knowledge of paragraph structure. This finding is similar to Adu's research finding (2015) that 66% of EFL students of Kumasi Polytechnic in Ghana have employed a definite format of a paragraph structure. Seeing this research results, I feel concerned because the research participants of my study are students of English Department who should have better paragraph structure knowledge. So, the lecturers of UNISBANK should attempt to increase the students' competence such as by giving more practice, more proper instruction.

Increasing the students' paragraph structure knowledge is important because based on Marzban's research conclusion (2014), teaching paragraph structure has any effect on the reading comprehension ability of EFL learners, teaching paragraph structure can increase the reading comprehension ability of EFL learners. This is because familiarity with main idea, supporting ideas, supporting details can guide readers in comprehending texts. Similarly, Gee (2008) argues that good writers are also good readers. Moreillon (2007) also explains that reading and writing skills are two sides of literacy coin that cannot be separated, that influence each other. The following is an example of paragraph employing complete paragraph structure of 1) topic sentence, 2) supporting sentences, 3) concluding sentence. The paragraph is presented unedited.

Data 1

1) Reality shows on television are very interesting. 2) This is because it gives motivation to audiences. 3) I have spirit to reach my dream after I watch it. 4) For example: Kick Andy show. 5) The shows also gives moral value because often present handicap people. 6) For example: Hitam Putih show. 7) So I think reality shows are good for us.

The structure of the paragraph above is as follows:

Sentence 1: Topic sentence.

Sentence 2: Major supporting sentence.

Sentence 3: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 4: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 5: Major supporting sentence.

Sentence 6: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 7: Concluding sentence.

Sentence 1 is topic sentence consisting of topic *reality shows* and controlling idea *interesting*. Reid (2000) calls this as a topic sentence of opinion which often uses value word. Sentence 2 directly explains the controlling idea; i.e. one component of *interesting*: giving motivation. Sentence 3 and 4 give further explanation of sentence 2, namely stating the effect and the example. Sentence 5 directly explains the controlling idea; i.e. another component of *interesting*: giving moral value. Sentence 6 is further explanation of sentence 5 by giving example. Then sentence 7 is a concluding sentence in the form of comment.

Eleven (37%) stand-alone paragraphs produced by the EFL students did not have conclusion employing the format of 1) topic sentence, 2) supporting sentences. Boardman and Frydenberg (2002) state that the last part of a paragraph is a conclusion giving emphasis and a sense of completeness. The closing of an essay should indicate that the essay has come to an end. It gives the paragraph its final shape, and it gives the writer a last opportunity to show that their ideas are worthwhile.

Reid (2000) suggests that a writer follow these guidelines to make a conclusion: (1) Begin with a concluding connector to help the reader, (2) Make sure that the conclusion is connected to the topic sentence, (3) Consider one or more of the following: a prediction, a recommendation, and/or a solution. A writer should avoid these problems in a conclusion: too much summary, any completely new idea.

An example of EFL student's paragraph without conclusion is presented unedited below.

Data 2

1) Watching reality shows have advantages and disadvantages. 2) They educate us by informing new things besides entertain us. 3) They often invite trusted sources who share useful, good and motivated topic. 4) But some are not good. 5) For example: Katakana Putus. 6) It presents a fake.

The structure of the paragraph is as follows:

Sentence 1: Topic sentence.

Sentence 2: Major supporting sentence.

Sentence 3: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 4: Major supporting sentence.

Sentence 5: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 6: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 1 presents the main idea; this topic sentence consists of topic *watching reality shows* and controlling idea *advantages and disadvantages*. Reid (2000) calls this as a topic sentence of intent that tells what the writer will explain in the paragraph; in this case *advantages and disadvantages*. Sentence 2 directly explains the controlling idea; i.e. the advantages: educating and entertaining. Sentence 3 gives further explanation of sentence 2. Sentence 4 directly explains the controlling idea; i.e. disadvantages: not good for the audience. Sentence 5 and 6 are further explanation of sentence 4 by giving example and reason.

Ten (33%) EFL students' paragraphs were fully or completely developed while the other 20 (67%) paragraphs were incompletely developed. This finding is somewhat different from Rustipa's study (2013) that 50% of the professional writings under study were incompletely developed.

The students' problem to develop complete paragraph is mainly in explaining the major supporting sentence with minor supporting sentences. This is similar to the result of Khansir et.al.'s study (2013) that the largest number of errors committed by EFL learners in Iran at undergraduate was in the supporting details. Oshima et.al. (2006) explain that a paragraph is full/ complete in its development when it has the supporting sentence(s) it needs to explain the topic sentence. The incomplete paragraph of course will cause undep discussion. In the following examples of complete and incomplete paragraphs are presented unedited.

Data 3

1) Indonesia TV has many reality shows that actually not real. 2) This is because firstly the crew has prepared some people to be the characters. 3) It happens in "Katakan Putus." 4) Once a friend of mine was offered to be the actor in one episode. 5) So it is true that the characters are not real. 6) How it can be called reality show if the crew has prepared the characters. 7) Secondly, the crew has set the story. 8) They prepare a scenario to be learned by the characters. 9) After watching it several times, I realize that the story is so weird and does not make sense. 10) In conclusion, what is called reality show very often does not reflect reality.

The structure of the paragraph is as follows:

Sentence 1: Topic sentence.

Sentence 2: Major supporting sentence.

Sentence 3: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 4: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 5: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 6: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 7: Major supporting sentence.

Sentence 8: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 9: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 10: Concluding sentence.

Sentence 1 presents the the topic sentence containing topic *reality shows* and controlling idea *not real*. Sentence 2 directly explains the controlling idea by giving one reason: the characters have been prepared. Sentences 3, 4, 5, 6 give further explanation of sentence 2 by giving an example and stating the writer's critic. Sentence 7 directly explains the controlling idea by mentioning another reason: the story has been set. Then, Sentence 8 and 9 are further explanation of sentence 7. Finally, sentence 10 presents the conclusion by emphasizing the writer's opinion.

Data 4

1) Bedah Rumah reality show is popular, qualified and has high moral value. 2) The program gives a lot of help to the poor. 3) The audience can see many families who lives in a house with bad condition. 4) And also we can see the daily activities of the house owners. 5) We can learn how to be grateful with what we have. 6) A lot of people watch it and like it. 7) So Bedah Rumah is a good reality show.

The structure of the paragraph is as follows:

Sentence 1: Topic sentence.

Sentence 2: Major supporting sentence.

Sentence 3: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 4: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 5: Minor supporting sentence.

Sentence 6: Major supporting sentence.

Sentence 7: Concluding sentence.

Sentence 1 presents the topic sentence containing topic *Bedah Rumah reality show* and 3 controlling ideas *popular, qualified and has high moral value*. Sentence 2 directly explains the third controlling idea *has high moral value* by giving one reason: giving help to the poor. Sentences 3, 4, 5 give further explanation of sentence 2 by illustrating about the poor. Sentence 6 directly explains the first controlling idea: *popular*. Finally, sentence 7 presents the conclusion by giving comment.

From the analysis above, it is clear that the second controlling idea *qualified* is not explained at all in the body paragraph. And the first controlling idea *popular* is minimally explained, only in one major supporting sentence.

Actually this major supporting sentence needs more explanation to make the paragraph complete. However, the third controlling idea has *high moral value* is developed completely. So the undeveloped second controlling idea *qualified* and the incompletely developed first controlling idea *popular* make the paragraph classified as incomplete paragraph.

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

Based on the data analysis, some conclusions can be drawn as follows. The EFL students under the study have problems with paragraph structure and paragraph development. Thirty percent of the students do not conclude or close their stand-alone paragraphs. The bigger problem the students face is in developing complete paragraph. The study shows that merely 33% of the students are able to develop their paragraphs completely. Based on this conclusion, it is suggested that English teachers compensate the students' weakness in constructing paragraphs by emphasizing complete paragraph development because most students have problems in developing ideas.

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