

Investigating paragraph writing skills in the essays of undergraduate students at the Namibia University of Science and Technology

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Abstract

This study investigated the writing abilities of first-year undergraduate students through essay paragraphs to determine the areas that needed to be concentrated on when teaching writing skills, because an essay consists of different paragraphs. The aim was to highlight areas that educators needed to concentrate on when developing students' writing abilities. The study was qualitative in nature. The population comprised all the essays that were written by Namibian school students in the matrix who were doing their first English communication module. Systematic sampling of probability was used to select 30 essays that were studied to provide findings for the research objectives. The study revealed that the students had mastered the basic components of essay writing, for example adding a topic, dividing the essay into paragraphs, and correctly interpreting the question or topic. However, the essays' paragraphs were incorrectly structured, as most lacked thesis statements; the ideas were not discussed in detail; the body paragraphs lacked a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence; and unity and coherence were lacking in most paragraphs. The study suggested strategies to write correctly structured paragraphs that aid the students' general writing abilities. The study recommended that the teaching of the essay should emphasise the structure of the paragraphs as an unstructured essay affects comprehension of the message.

Keywords: writing skills, essay writing, academic writing, paragraphing

Introduction and background

Academic writing is a crucial skill in academia that students need to master to succeed in universities (Knight et al., 2020). Both undergraduate and postgraduate students are expected to write documents that require effective writing skills that are assessed in various contexts within a university (Knight et al., 2020). It is thus important to develop the students' writing skills right away in their undergraduate years. In Namibia, students' writing skills, both in their first language (L1) and second language (L2), are developed right away at the school level. The writing skills of students who pass the matric and get admitted into universities are developed further in English language courses that most universities offer for undergraduate students to develop their writing skills for different contexts. The English language courses focus on the four linguistic skills of writing, speaking, reading and listening. Despite all these efforts to develop students' writing skills, their writing skills at the university level are still found inadequate (Frans, 2014; Mungungu, 2010).

Frans' (2014) study carried out in one of the public universities in Namibia observed that many undergraduate students had several problems, such as inability to structure their sentences correctly, which made them unable to

express ideas clearly and adequately when writing. Bulqiyah et al. (2021) observed that mastering essay writing skills is crucial as it improves students' communication which results in them scoring good grades and become good professionals. With many recent innovations in artificial intelligence (AI) software that help students write, such as Ask artificial intelligence, ChatGPT and others, many students may opt for these programmes if their writing skills are not adequately developed. Although TURNITIN software has introduced a feature that detects the students' works that are generated by AI, there is a need to investigate where the students' difficulties lie in writing for the educators to know the areas that they need to tackle when equipping the students with the necessary skills required for them to write adequately. As Liu and Wang (2011) explained, studying students' written errors "provide teachers and/or researchers with a unique opportunity to gain insight into the mysterious process of L2 writing in the same way that symptoms contribute to the discovery of how the human body functions" (p. 584).

Statement of the problem

In the study that investigated the students' writing skills at Polytechnic of Namibia, which

has now been renamed as the Namibia University of Science and Technology, Frans (2014) concluded that students had poor communicative writing skills and suggested several interventions to improve the situation. This observation points to the need to take action to improve the writing skills of the students at the institution under study. Al-Ghabra and Najim (2019) explained that writing is important in students' learning processes to achieve academic success, and it is therefore important to develop the students' writing skills. To achieve this, there is need to investigate the undergraduate students' writing ability of paragraphs of an essay to highlight areas that educators need to concentrate on when developing the students' writing ability. This study investigated the writing abilities of first year undergraduate students through essay paragraphs to determine the areas that need to be concentrated on when teaching writing skills, because a document that is well written consists of different paragraphs.

Research objectives

The main objective of the study was to analyse and identify writing difficulties arising from undergraduate students' essays. The sub-objectives arising from the main research objective were:

1. To identify components of paragraphing that the students demonstrate strong abilities in.
2. To explain common errors that students make in paragraph writing in their essays.
3. To provide possible solutions to the errors identified when writing different paragraphs of an essay.

Significance of the research

The study findings might inform the students on the correct way to structure an academic paragraph. The findings might be a guide for both lecturers and teachers on aspects to concentrate on when teaching students how to write an academic essay. The students might learn skills that might help them write paragraphs that are well organised and easy for the readers to grasp the content. Consequently, this might improve the writing skills of the students when they later join the job industry after completing their university education.

Delimitation of the research

The research involved only essays of first year undergraduate students who were registered for the first English language communication

course at the Namibia University of Science and Technology, which would make it unrealistic to generalise the findings to all fulltime students' writing abilities or the writing abilities of students at other public universities in Namibia. However, this delimitation gave the researchers sufficient time to do an in-depth analysis of the subject under study.

Literature review and theoretical framework **Error analysis approach**

The study was informed by error analysis (EA) approach. Corder (1974) developed this linguistic approach to analyse the types of errors made by the students in their speech and written performances. Various authors have defined EA, however, Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005, p. 51) define EA as "a set of procedures for identifying, describing and explaining learners' errors". Corder (1974) categorised the errors into two: the theoretical type, which is about understanding the language, and the applied type, which is about learning the language effectively. Students' errors are not negative, because they are an indication of the students' underlying knowledge or competence of a language (Corder, 1967; Brown, 2000).

Wu and Garza (2014) explain that investigating errors has two purposes: diagnostic, which is to identify the error, and prognostic, which is to find a solution to the problem. In terms of teaching, Corder (1967) explains that the diagnostic purpose indicates whether the student has grasped the language during the learning process, while the prognostic purpose informs the teacher of how to modify their teaching approach to eliminate the error identified. There is an increase in studies that use EA, because this approach identifies the problem and suggests possible strategies (Wu and Garza, 2014). For example, in the Namibian context, Mungungu (2010) conducted a qualitative study to identify the errors committed in writing by three Namibian groups: Oshiwambo, Afrikaans, and Silozi. The types of errors were compared, and the frequency of their errors identified.

The study revealed that many errors were committed in tenses, prepositions, articles, and spellings. Mungungu's study found that the Oshiwambo group committed the most errors followed by the Silozi group while the Afrikaans group had the fewest errors. This study differs from Mungungu's (2010) study because it concentrated on the technicality of writing paragraphs rather than grammaticality of the essays. The error analysis method was

also used by Aitameemy and Daradkeh (2019) to study the types of errors in paragraph writing of 80 students in the Preparatory Year at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University. The students were asked to choose one given topic for an essay. The study used Liu and Wang's (2011) model. The findings revealed a total of 264 errors committed by the participants, which were categorised as: errors in paragraph development, coherence, unity, and inconsistency of point of view.

Classification of written errors

This study employed Kramer et al. (1995) scheme of classifying written errors in paragraphs. This model was also used by Liu and Wang (2011). The written errors within the paragraphs were classified into four categories: error in paragraph unity; error in paragraph development; error in paragraph coherence and inconsistency in point of view.

Error in paragraph unity

Unity in a paragraph is achieved by the controlling ideas around which the paragraph is organised (Kramer et al., 1995). Liu and Wang (2011, p. 584) explain that unity is not achieved when: a) failing to show a controlling idea, b) having more than one controlling idea, or when, c) a topic sentence does not control all ideas in a paragraph.

Error in paragraph development

Kramer et al. (1995) explain that controlling ideas or any other subordinate ideas within a paragraph should be sufficiently explained or developed. Liu and Wang (2011, p. 584) explain that errors in paragraph development can occur when: a) the essay did not provide sufficient information to explain the subject thoroughly, b) there was no sufficient explanation for a controlling idea, topic or topic statement in the argumentative essay, or c) the essay failed to give the correct information or related information needed to explain the topic further.

Error in paragraph coherence

The ideas within the paragraph must be linked together. This involves arranging the ideas or sentences in a paragraph so that they can be related logically, using connecting devices to show relationships between ideas (Kramer et al., 1995). Liu and Wang (2011, p. 588) observed in their study that many students did not have issues with achieving coherence; however, three types of errors in paragraph coherence were found: ineffective organisation

of the ideas, the lack of transitional markers and the misuse of cohesive markers.

Inconsistency in point of view

Kramer et al. (1995) observed that a paragraph can have lack of all other errors but still fail to communicate effectively if it is not consistent with the point of view. The assumption is that if the information is written from the point of view of the author, that point of view will be maintained throughout, and a switch in the point of view will cause confusion in readers. Drawing on Liu and Wang (2011), errors in consistency were found in the "wrong shift in person, tense or number between sentences within a paragraph, for these wrong shifts could make the reader confused about who was speaking and to whom (person), what the time sequence was (tense), and how many were being talked about (number)" (p. 590). The proposed research was hence conducted in light of these key theoretical considerations.

Research methodology

The study was conducted at the Namibia University of Science and Technology, which has two campuses in the country, but the study was conducted at the main campus in Windhoek. Every year, the university attracts students from different regions of the country and beyond. The students who authored the essays that were studied were of diverse cultures, linguistic backgrounds, and schools. The study adopted an explanatory research design that facilitated a better understanding of the situation being studied. The research used the interpretivist paradigm approach, because it aimed to do an in-depth study of qualitative data, of the students' essays. As interpretivism is based on the assumption that reality is subjective and is socially constructed (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022), an analysis of multiple student essays would facilitate better understanding of the problem under study. Hence, a qualitative approach was adopted to guide the investigation. The population comprised all the previously written essays of full-time students who were enrolled for the course under study that time. The essays were part of Assessment 1 in Semester 1, 2023.

To begin with, the study only included essays that were written by full-time students who obtained their matric in Namibian schools, because the aim was to inform the existing methods of teaching writing skills in Namibian schools and universities. Systematic sampling was used because it is suitable for a larger

population that is diverse, as it was in this study, where the population comprised 300 essays. The total number of students who went to school in Namibia and registered for the course was 300, and each student was equal to one essay. Therefore, the desired sample for this study was 30 essays. The total population ($N = 300$) was divided by the desired sample of 30, which was equal to $n = 10$. Therefore, the list of all Principles of English Language Use (PLU) students was obtained from the statistics office, and every 10th student was selected. The previously written essays of the selected students formed part of the sample. The data were collected from 30 essays, which had been previously written as part of students' assessments on the given topics. A checklist which was informed by literature on scheme of classifying written errors by Kramer et al. (1995) was used to study the essays.

Three steps of EA, as explained by Corder (1974), were followed to analyse the data. These steps are collection of sample errors; identification of errors; and description of errors. The essays were read and paragraphs were analysed per Kramer et al.'s (1995) scheme of classifying written errors. The errors identified were presented and discussed under the emerging themes which were derived from the research objectives. The possible solutions, which were informed by the literature review, were discussed per the error identified.

The raw data were locked in a filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer. The identities of the authors of the essays were not revealed in the study. All the sources were acknowledged. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the institution under study. The researchers were as objective as possible by avoiding any personal knowledge of essay writing that might interfere with how the data were analysed. All personal biases were prevented by focusing on the research objectives. Only the essays of students who met the sampling criteria as outlined here in the methodology section were included in the study.

Findings and discussions

This section provides the findings as per the three main objectives of the study. The findings were presented and discussed under the emerging themes. The findings were reinforced with excerpts from the essays that were studied.

Components of paragraphing that students demonstrated strong ability in

The study revealed that most students demonstrated strong ability in the basic components of the essay. This explains the need to strengthen the teaching of writing skills for the students to advance their writing skills and be able to express themselves deeply in writing on the subject using well-structured paragraphs that are easy to read. Below are components that most students demonstrated strong ability in.

Essay topics

The study revealed that most essays had headings, which indicated that the students were aware of the importance of the topic in the essay. The questions did not provide the exact topic that students should use for their essays, but rather prompts on what they should write about. For example, "*In life, one has to make decisions. Write an essay about a life-changing decision you have made and will never regret. Explain or narrate*". The students were able to derive topics from the questions for their essays. For example, "*Staying in school was the best decision of my life*", and "*A life-changing decision I have made and will never regret*". Even though some students copied the topics from the instructions as if they had formulated them, the strength lies in the fact that they were aware that an essay should have a topic.

Paragraphing

The majority of the students' essays were divided into paragraphs. Although some paragraphs were not correctly divided because ideas continued from one paragraph to the next, the study revealed that most students knew that the essay should be divided into different paragraphs. The students' ability to divide their essays into paragraphs is an indication that they had grasped the basic idea of writing an essay, and they needed to be trained more on how to structure their ideas within paragraphs to demonstrate advanced writing skills.

Question interpretation

The students seemed to have interpreted the question correctly. For example, regarding the question that read, "*People have different preferences regarding marriages; would you opt for a polygamous or monogamous marriage? Deliberate on the pros and cons of your choice*". Most students chose either monogamous or polygamous marriages and discussed the pros and cons of such marriages. This is an indication that students had a strong

ability to comprehend what they were asked. Although there were instances where some students misinterpreted the topic, most of the students were able to interpret the questions correctly.

Conclusion paragraphs

The study revealed that most essays had correct conclusion paragraphs that summarised the points, rounded up the ideas, or suggested solutions. For example, Extract 1: *“In a nutshell, urbanisation leads to many environmental problems, and those are the serious ones. There is a need to educate people about the negative consequences of urbanisation to save the environment”*. At times, the conclusions were shallow and did not capture all the elements discussed in the essay. Extract 2, below gives an example of a shallow example which did not capture the ideas discussed. This conclusion is vague because it does not specify which ground one needs to stand about the content. Extract 2: *“In conclusion always stand your ground”*.

Common errors that students make in paragraph writing in the essays

The study revealed how the ideas were discussed shallowly in most essays, which meant students lacked critical thinking skills, lacked details to support the point being discussed in depth, and the ideas were not correctly structured, which made the essays difficult to read. These findings are detailed below.

Organisation

The study revealed that most students seemed to focus on answering the question or topic than organising the ideas in the paragraph. For example, they discussed *“the environmental consequences of urbanisation”* and ignored the way they organised the ideas in the paragraph to bring out the point. There is a structure that a paragraph should follow, depending on what type of paragraph it is. The study revealed that most introduction paragraphs lacked a thesis statement. Most essays gave general ideas throughout the introduction paragraph and did not say anything about what the essay would focus on. Also, some essays gave detailed information right away in the introduction without introducing the point by giving background information. The implication of these errors is that the readers get confused as they continue to read the essay. They would be trying to figure out what the essay focused on

instead of grasping the information discussed in the essay. Below is an example of an introduction from the students' work that lacked a thesis statement. The topic was to discuss the pros and cons of preferring a polygamous or monogamous marriage. Extract 3: *“In the world of nowadays, people have choices when it comes to marriage. Most young people are getting married at a very young age because of the cultures they have adopted from their families”*. Below is another introduction from the student's work on the topic *“technology integration to aid education in Namibia”*. Extract 4: *“Technology can be used to aid education in Namibian schools. Technology is a system of using computers, the internet, and smartphones when doing anything like writing your exams online, taking classes online, or looking for a job online. It is very simple, and it makes work easier for you. It is very cheap”*.

Both of these introductions did not guide the readers, as there was no statement that revealed what these essays would focus on. A body paragraph should also follow a certain structure; however, this study revealed that most paragraphs lacked structures because they either lacked a topic sentence, topic sentences that were not related to the thesis, supporting sentences not related to the topic sentence, supporting sentences that were not related, and/or paragraphs that lacked concluding sentences. The extract below demonstrates some of these errors. Extract 5: *“In addition to this, the aid of technology in Namibia, we will have better educated learners because they have phones or laptops that they are able to use to get access to their school materials, such as notes, and they can use phones to Google their school things. With the aid of technology in schools, the education level in Namibia will be very high due to the technology that is being used”*.

The structure of this paragraph is incorrect. This was a body paragraph, but it lacked a stand-alone topic sentence that states the idea to be discussed in the paragraph. All the sentences were explaining and supporting an idea that was not introduced in a topic sentence. The paragraph also lacked a concluding sentence, which made it read as if it was incomplete.

Content ideas and development

The purpose of an essay is for students to demonstrate in-depth knowledge of the topic they are discussing. The common error that was observed when it came to content ideas and

development was inadequate explanations. The essay simply touched on the topic by listing the points but did not go into detail by providing sufficient information for the readers to understand the points discussed. Extract 6: *“Discuss how technology can be used to aid education in Namibian schools (topic). Did you know that nowadays' education is a significant tool for everything? Education plays a role in our lives and in our society. Technology can be implemented in a good way to aid education in Namibian schools and achieve our goals in schools (introduction). The technological use of phones can be implemented to aid education in schools. Phones and laptops need to be used at schools so we will be able to search and Google things that we do not understand in certain subjects. Phones and laptops are technological devices that a learner at school needs to have so that we will be able to do our activities and homework on our devices (first body paragraph)”*.

To discuss the content ideas and development, the topic, the introduction, and the first body paragraph were quoted (in extract 4). The focus of the body paragraph (in Extract 4) is to discuss how technology can be used to aid education in Namibian schools, as stated in the topic and reaffirmed in the thesis statement. However, the ideas were partially developed as they lacked evidence and required further explanation to explain the subject thoroughly. First, only two general reasons were given: *“To search and google for advanced things that we do not understand in certain subjects”* and *“Be able to do our activities and homework on our devices”*. To explain the first point, the author needed to specify what kind of “things” will be searched. Another option would be giving a few examples why only technological devices such as laptops and cell phones would work. As it stands, the point was not thoroughly developed and, thus, not convincing. The ideas were listed without being discussed.

Secondly, about the second reason, the author needed to explain why they needed to do the activities via their cell phones and laptops. Mentioning that they wanted to do homework using those devices was not sufficient, as it created suspense and was not convincing. To go in depth, the student needed to explain why they needed to use cell phones and laptops to do the activities. The explanation would convince the audience why the use of books and/or any other hardcopy methods would not be the best alternative compared to cell phones and laptops. Therefore, the paragraph needed further

development by providing at least three well-explained points and a concluding sentence that signalled that the idea was complete. As it stands, this body paragraph looks incomplete.

Another mistake was that there were too many ideas in one paragraph. A body paragraph was supposed to be based on one main idea and explained in detail; however, students tended to bring several unrelated points into one paragraph, as shown in Extract 5. At one point, incorrect information was provided. As depicted in Extract 5, the first sentence, which seemed to be the topic sentence, suggests that the paragraph would discuss the common goal and different missions of the students. However, each supporting sentence brought in a different idea. There was no unity in this paragraph, as ideas were different as illustrated below. Extract 7: *“All students go to universities with one common goal and different missions. In the end, graduating on time and having a good career option in multiple sectors and sections is the vision. But it's never easy until it's done. The pace may differ, and the progress may not be the same, but if the vision that all students are fighting for is equally important to all, then it calls for a challenge. A challenge is just the top cover of obstacles that students face leading them to quit or drop out, while some fight to the very end”*.

Mechanics

Grammatical errors may ruin the comprehension of the message in the paragraph. The study revealed that the most common errors in terms of mechanics were comma splices and run-on sentences. Sometimes two or more complete ideas were written as a sentence, which lead to a run-on sentence. For example, *“Nowadays, people in offices are no longer using envelopes to send information to certain offices it's easy to communicate and share different databases”*. Also, sometimes complete independent ideas were separated with commas, which lead to comma splices. For example, *“It has rapidly increased in the past years and it had benefits on the society, technology can also be used to aid education in Namibian schools”*. These types of errors made the sentences difficult to read, which affected the understanding of the message in the paragraph.

The study also revealed that many essays lacked transitional words, transitional phrases, and/or cohesive devices between paragraphs and/or sentences, which made the ideas not to flow smoothly. Also, the study revealed that

there were instances where the tenses were not used correctly in the essay. For Example, “*when people moved to cities or towns. They forget that there are also disadvantages*”. The first sentence is in past tense while the last sentence is in present tense but explaining one situation, which causes confusion. Although there were spelling errors, awkward syntax, missing words, or incorrect use of prepositions, they were not common in most essays.

Strategies for writing an ideal body paragraph

An analysis of paragraph writing error patterns discussed above points to the need to explore strategies for writing effective body paragraphs in an essay, to convey ideas and arguments coherently, especially when it comes to unity, development of ideas and coherence. Drawing on Pane and Sanchez (2023) and Tiryaki and Bican (2021), a well-structured body paragraph of an essay contains these key elements: the topic sentence, supporting evidence, transitional words, ensuring unity and coherence, and a concluding statement. These components of a well-structured essay paragraph are discussed in detail below.

The topic sentence

Each body paragraph starts with a clear and concise topic sentence. Drawing on Banjarnahor and Narius (2019), a good body paragraph should have a clear and focused topic sentence. This sentence introduces the main point or argument of the paragraph and serves as a roadmap for the reader. Without a topic sentence that unifies sentences and ideas within the paragraph, the paragraph ideas would be disjointed and illogical. Sicat (2022) also emphasises the importance of writing a well-structured body paragraph in which sentences with similar ideas are joined together by a topic sentence. Also, with reference to Pane and Sanchez (2023), the topic sentence limits the focus to only one area or topic that can be discussed in a single paragraph, the controlling idea.

Supporting evidence

After the topic sentence, the writer provides evidence to support the main point introduced in the topic sentence. As Pane and Sanchez (2023) explain, the support sentences provide this type of evidence in different ways, such as reasons, examples, facts and definitions to back up the main idea expressed in the topic sentence. Presentation of evidence to support

the main idea introduced in the topic sentence is insufficient without explanation.

Transitions

Transitional words and phrases are used to connect sentences and ideas between and within paragraphs. Banjarnahor and Narius (2019) explain how using transition signals is another technique to assist students to write coherently, because transitions indicate how one step has been completed and another one will begin. This helps in maintaining the flow of the paragraph. Words such as “furthermore” “in addition” or “conversely” can show relationships between ideas.

Unity and coherence

Paragraph writing in the context of this paper entailed ensuring that every sentence in the paragraph was related to the main point and supported the thesis statement, an argument elevated by Tiryaki and Bican (2021). In their study on problems experienced by students in the paragraph development process, Tiryaki and Bican (2021) concluded that lack of unity among the sentences that made up the paragraph was one of the key challenges. Yet, they emphasised that unity and coherence were key to a well-structured body paragraph.

Concluding sentence

It is advisable to end the paragraph with a concluding sentence that summarises the key points made in the paragraph and links it back to the thesis statement. This reinforces an argument's relevance. Besides summarising the information presented in the paragraph, Pane and Sanchez (2023) suggest additional techniques for the concluding sentence, such as offering a solution, making a recommendation or predicting a situation. According to Banjarnahor and Narius (2019), conclusion is the last impression you leave with the reader; thus, it is very important that the conclusion is striking, suitable and satisfying.

These strategies might serve as a roadmap for constructing a persuasive and well-structured essay that effectively conveys arguments and insights. Echoing Mukmunatien et al. (2023), after a complete essay has been written, feedback from peers can assist the writer to identify areas for improvement and ensure clarity and coherence. Mukmunatien et al.'s (2023) study revealed how English Foreign Language students are usually in need of emotional support to accomplish their goals when writing essays and paragraphs. Finally,

the body paragraphs need to be revised and proofread for clarity, conciseness, and correct grammar and punctuation.

Conclusion

As it was also found by Bulqiyah et al. (2021), the current study revealed that most of the components that the students had good knowledge of when it came to essay writing were the basic elements of an essay. For example, adding a topic to the essay, dividing the essays into paragraphs, and question interpretation. There is a need for the students to advance their writing skills by being able to discuss the subject in detail in correctly structured paragraphs. The study revealed that many of the students concentrated more on providing information on the topic they were writing about and lacked skills on how to structure different paragraphs correctly. As explained in Rohim (2019), the paragraphs make up an essay; therefore, when paragraphs lack certain components, the message gets affected as it might be difficult to read, or the message becomes ambiguous. Therefore, the teaching of an essay should focus on writing different components of a paragraph, because the structure is important in an essay.

The study touched on strategies to improve the students' writing abilities through essay writing. These strategies included writing a correctly structured introductory paragraph that has background information and a thesis statement; body paragraphs that focus on different ideas and are structured correctly by starting with a topic sentence that is related to the thesis statement; followed by supporting sentences that are related to the topic sentence and bring in different detailed arguments about the idea in a topic sentence; and a concluding sentence that rounds up the ideas (Mukmunatien et al., 2023). Transitional words or phrases should be used to guide the flow of ideas within the paragraphs, which makes reading easy. Unity and coherence should be maintained throughout all paragraphs.

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