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Iraqi EFL University Students' Awareness of Types and Qualities of a Good Paragraph

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Abstract

This paper investigates the qualities of a good paragraph. It is divided into two parts, namely: the practical part which examines the concept of a paragraph and related matters such as types and qualities of a good paragraph; the second part examines the variables that make a paragraph more logical and understood. The researcher follows the qualitative and quantitative methods of research. The study is conducted on first-year students (evening and morning sessions) at the Department of English / College of Arts/ Mustansiriyah University. The data is based on responses collected from the students. The paper concludes that:

١. Most students could not produce paragraphs properly. They show a tendency to mix sorts of a paragraph. This is because there is a big gap between recognizing these types of a paragraph and producing them.
٢. Students also lack the knowledge of the qualities that make a paragraph better understood. In terms of processes of writing, most students, if not all, juxtapose ideas randomly. The result is a lack of coherence and consistency.

Keywords: Coherence, Unity, Transitional signals

معرفة طلبة الجامعة العراقية لانواع وخصائص الفقرة المفهومة في اللغة الانكليزية

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المخلص:

يدرس هذا البحث صفات الفقرة المفهومة في اللغة الانكليزية. وينقسم إلى جزئين وكالاتي: الجزء العملي الذي يدرس مفهوم الفقرة ومواضيع ذات الصلة مثلا أنواع فقرة ، صفات الفقرة المفهومة ؛ الجزء الثاني يدرس المتغيرات التي تجعل الفقرة أكثر منطقية ومفهومة. يتبع الباحث الأساليب البحثية النوعية والكمية. أجريت الدراسة على طلبة المرحلة الأولى (الدراسات الصباحية والمسائية) في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها / كلية الآداب / الجامعة المستنصرية. تستند البيانات على الاجوبة التي تم جمعها من طلبة المرحلة الأولى. توصلت الدراسة الحالية بالنتائج الآتية:

1. معظم الطلبة لا يستطيعون تمييز وكتابة انواع الفقرات بشكل صحيح. حيث يميلون إلى الخلط بين أنواع الفقرة. هذا لأن هناك فجوة كبيرة بين التعرف على هذه الأنواع من جهة وبين كتابتهم من جهة اخرى.
2. كما يفتقر الطلاب إلى معرفة الصفات التي تجعل الفقرة اكثر فهما. من حيث مراحل الكتابة ، فإن معظم الطلبة ، إن لم يكن جميعهم ، يسطرون الأفكار بشكل عشوائي. والنتيجة هي عدم وجود تماسك واتساق في الفقرة.

كلمات مفتاحية: الترابط المنطقي، الانسجام، الادوات الانتقالية

1.1 Introduction

Nearly most linguists assume that writing is the most difficult skill that EFL learners face when learning a second language. This is because there are rigid rules that a learner needs to follow in order to produce a suitable piece of writing. Such rules are concerned with grammar, spelling, punctuation, you name it.

Furthermore, there are certain qualities that a learner should include in the sentence and paragraph levels such as “coherence”, “unity”, “transitional signals”, “consistency”, “vague use of pronouns” and so on.

To start with, here comes the importance of the current paper, which sheds light on the above mentioned qualities. The present study does not focus on capitalization rules, spelling or even grammar rules because such issues have been examined in previous studies. Conversely, the study is limited to the qualities of the paragraph that students misuse. It aims at examining types of paragraphs in terms of recognition and production; and conducting a test on variables that make writing more logical and understood. It is to be mentioned that the variables by which students will be examined are found in most books of linguistics, in general, and academic writing, in particular, including “Razzaq and Al-Hassan’s (1986) College Composition and L. G. Alexander’s (1960) Essay and Letter Writing.

1.2 Definitions of Paragraph

Most linguists, if not all, propose a similar idea for the notion of a “paragraph”; including Chaplen (1970: 1), Reid and Lindstorm (1980: 1), Oxford Dictionary (1999: 506) and Hopper et al. (2000: 131). They hold that a paragraph is thought of as a set of sentences that narrowly narrate or describe an independent topic. Additionally, Razak and Al-Hassan (1986: 49) add that it is a paragraph what makes a “composition” coherent, mind-blowing and legible.

To add, Saslow and Ascher (2011: 140) maintain that:

A paragraph is a group of sentences that relate to a topic or a theme. When your writing contains sections about a variety of topics, it is a good idea to divide them into separate paragraphs. When there is more than one paragraph, it is customary, though not required, to include a topic sentence in each paragraph that

summarizes or announces the main idea of the paragraph. The other sentences in the paragraph traditionally include details or facts that support the main idea. Using topic sentences makes paragraphs clear and easier to understand.

To end up, if a written work is not broken up into smaller pieces of writing, it tends to be really hard to read, and the ideas can get so muddled up that readers are incapable of understanding what a writer is trying to express. So, if a writer wants to be clearly understood, he/she should use paragraphs (Crystal, 2008: 234).

1.3 Parts of the Paragraph

As mentioned earlier, a paragraph is not a set of random sentences joined together. Yet, there are essential parts each a paragraph should contain, namely: “the topic”, “the topic sentence”, “the supporting sentences” and “the concluding sentence”. These parts are illustrated in below detailed description: 1. “A topic” constitutes the broad meaning of a paragraph. It is considered to be an answer to the question “What is the paragraph about”? For example, “biochemistry, physiology and anatomy are all examples of topic medical subjects”. 2. “The topic sentence” begins a paragraph. It includes the principal idea which is further explained in the body of the paragraph. 3. “The supporting sentences” explain “the topic sentence”. They come in the form of “facts, examples, explanations or statistics”. 4. “The concluding sentence” signals the end of the paragraph. It sums up the major ideas of the paragraph. It represents “a last comment on the topic and leaves the reader with the most important ideas to think about; can make a suggestion or a prediction” (yabancidiller.kocaeli.edu.tr: 3-0).

1.0 Types of Paragraph

Since paragraphs vary according to function and technique, four types of paragraphs are reached at. They are illustrated below in detailed description.

1.0.1 Narrative

Alexander (1960: 10) comments that “Narrative paragraph” is supposed to tell a story or write about an event. Some of the stories may be written in dialogues. Dashes shouldn't be used in place of inverted commas, or employing quotations marks which aren't used in English. It is desirable to stick to the “past tense”. Below is an example of a “narrative paragraph”:

It's been almost ten years since I first ran for political office. I was thirty five years old at that time, four years out of law school, recently married, and generally impatient with life.

1.5.2 Descriptive

As its name suggests “descriptive paragraph describe people, objects or situations. The description may take the form of personal impressions or may be purely imaginary. Both simple present and simple past tenses are acceptable though present simple is more commonly used. See the example below.

The diver could just see a dark mass near the rocks. He swam nearer and after turning on his torch, he was able to make out the remains of an old ship. It was covered with mud and shells. Fish swam through a great hole in its side. The diver went through the hole and came to what had once been the engine-room. In the torchlight it looked empty and ghostly. Sea-weeds seemed to grow out of the ship's engines so that they took strange shapes. As he looked round him, the diver found it hard to believe that men had once worked there (ibid.: 18).

1.5.3 Expository

As cited in (<http://www.time.com/writing.com/uncategorized/expository-paragraphs>), in expository paragraphs, the writer supports instructions. They guide the reader gradually through a method. They often demand a research, but it is possible that the writer can depend on his/her own knowledge, as in:

Going to college can be expensive. First college tuition and room and board can cost anywhere from 2,000\$ to more than 10,000\$ per semester. Other expenses make going to college even expensive. For example, books typically cost between 100\$ and 500\$ each term.

1.5.4 Persuasive

Quoted from (<http://www.time.com/writing.com/uncategorized/persuasive-paragraphs>), a persuasive paragraph attempts to convince the reader to accept a certain viewpoint or understand the reader's position. Such kind of a paragraph is used in building arguments. It often requires the collection of facts and research. Notice the sample below.

Immigration contributes to the overall health of the American economy. Despite recent concerns related to the coast created by illegal and some legal immigration to the United States. This country has largely benefited from the skills, talents, and ambition that immigrants bring with them.

1.6 Qualities of a Good Paragraph

This subsection is the core of the current study. It investigates the qualities that give unity, logic, consistency and clarity to a paragraph. These qualities are explained below in detailed description and as follows:

1.6.1 Unity

A paragraph has unity if each sentence of which is closely and obviously interlinked to the other sentences of that paragraph. Also, unity is achieved through a “topic sentence”. It has a vivid reference of what the paragraph is about. However, this does not mean that the topic sentence should include everything found in the paragraph. Another means of obtaining unity is by “controlling idea”. Furthermore, a paragraph lacks unity if the “controlling idea” is not developed completely. To end up, a paragraph has unity if it relates one subject only (Sheehan, 1986: 22). Below is an example of a paragraph that lacks unity. It can be easily noted that that the topic sentence is not fully developed. In other words, the other sentences that follow the topic sentence are not closely related. Finally, the sentence “I did it!” has nothing to do with other sentences.

“The school cafeteria is usually crowded, but the other day things were worse than usual. A visiting band plays for the morning assembly and our band master invited the young men for lunch. Forty more people isn't much more when you are in a large auditorium but when you bring them to an already crowded cafeteria something had to give. It did!The moveable partition separating the faculty dining room from the student section came out laughing. For one day at least we had plenty of room and the faculty had the rare pleasure of student guests at lunch.”

“There are many reasons why I decided to study English. When I was a child I used to see my elder brother reading English books. When he finished secondary school he went to the College of Arts to study English. I was very proud of my brother and I want to be like him so I decided to study English,too.”

The topic sentence in the above paragraph is “There are many reasons why I decided to study English”. This paragraph lacks unity because it is not fully developed. The writer supports only one reason is while in the topic sentence the writer mentions that there are “many” reasons. Moreover, it is obvious that the writer switches from talking about himself to his brothers which completely contrasts the topic sentence.

1,6,2 Coherence

To have coherence, the shifting from one sentence to another should be logical and smooth. There must be no sudden jumps. Preparing an outline and using transitions are two common means to achieve coherence (Hopper et al. (2000: 104).

In addition to transition signals, coherence is achieved by the combined use of key words and reference word (pronouns/ determiners, such as "this" or synonyms). Key words are very important, for they represent the topic; however, the overuse of the key words in the paragraph makes it boring, impairing the flow of ideas, and therefore, making the paragraph less coherent. In order to avoid this problem, you should sometimes replace the key words with determiners, pronouns or synonyms (ibid.: 106). In the paragraph below, notice how the use of transitional signals and the smooth shifting from one sentence to another combined together add logic or coherence to the paragraph.

“Our school bus-driver has a very busy day. He has to pick all of us and get us to school by 8:30. Then he spends the rest of the morning supervising the school study halls. At noon he takes us for lunch and he picks us up again at home to get us back to school by 1:00. He returns to the study hall until 3:00 when he takes us all home again. Finally, when he has finished his route, he has to check to see that the bus is in good repair. Only after that is done does he go home.”

1,6,3 Correct Use of Transitional Words

As mentioned in the internet source ((Internet Source No. 3: 11), shifting from one idea to another should not be too sudden. Notice the following examples:

Too sudden: “People who lose their temper often become irrational. A wrong person may be victimized”.

Smoother: “People who lose their temper often become irrational. As a result of this, a wrong person may be victimized”.

To avoid sudden changes, you can use traditional words. However, you should not overuse them. You should overuse them only when needed for clarity (ibid.: ^).

| Signal | Usage |
|--------------------|--|
| An Addition | in addition, besides, moreover, also, furthermore |
| An Example | for example, for instance, to illustrate |
| A Summary | in conclusion, in summary, in short, in brief, to sum up, to conclude, all in all, on the whole |
| Result | so, as a result (of this), therefore, consequently, thus |
| Contrast | in contrast (to), but, however, on the other hand, yet, whereas, on the contrary, nevertheless, although, even though (despite, in spite of) |
| Explanation | that is, namely, in other words, that is to say, to put it in a different way |
| Emphasis | indeed, in fact, truly, as a matter of fact, actually |
| Purpose | so that, in order that, in order to, so as to |

1, 7, 4 Inconsistency

A shift in the grammatical structure of a sentence results in an inconsistency in point of view, and makes the meaning obscure. The most common faults in these respects are shifts in:

- 1. Tense
- 2. Mood

ϣ. Class or person of pronouns

ξ. Number

1, 6, 4, 1 Shifts in Tense

Past and present tenses are consistently used in narrative sentences. There should not be any change from past to present, or from present to past. For example:

- Romeo goes in disguise to a Capulet feast, falls in love with Juliet, *and married her secretly.*

Here in this sentence, the first two verbs are in the present tense, but the third verb is in the past tense 'married' should be changed to 'marries':

- Romeo goes in disguise to a Capulet feast, falls in love with Juliet, and marries her secretly.

1, 6, 4, 2 Shifts in Subject or Mood

The two parts of a compound sentence should be built in the same way. There should not be any change in the subject or voice in the sentence.

- Layla likes apples, but oranges taste better for me.

In the sentence, the subject changes from a person 'Layla' in the first Clause, to a thing 'Oranges' in the second clause. The sentence can be improved by making a personal noun or pronoun the subject of both clauses:

- Layla likes apples, but I prefer oranges.

1, 6, 4, 3 Shifts in Class or Person of Pronouns

The indefinite pronoun 'one' and the personal pronouns 'he' and 'they' are not interchangeable. There should not be a switch over in the middle of a sentence to a different kind of pronoun, in the following sentence, the pronoun shifts from 'one' to 'you'

- If one tries hard enough, you will succeed.

The sentence can be improved by changing 'one' to 'you':

- If you try hard, you will succeed.

1, 6, 4, 4 Shifts in Number

A singular pronoun should not be treated as it is a plural, e.g.:

- Each student in the class was asked to sign their name on the list.
In this sentence 'each student', and 'name' are singular, 'their' is plural. 'Their' must be changed to 'his' like the following sentence:

- Each student in the class was asked to sign his name on the list.

2. Methodology

This part is considered to be a link between the theoretical part of the study and the practical one. It involves the method that is used to conduct the research, sample and date.

2.1 Method

In the current study, the researcher follows the qualitative and quantitative methods of research. The qualitative method is specifically used in the first and second steps, i.e., the recognition of types of a paragraph and qualities of a good paragraph. The quantitative method is applied to students to find out how appropriate the pieces of writing students produce. Most accurately, the researcher follows three steps: firstly, students are given four paragraphs with no titles. They have to decide which paragraph is descriptive, narrative, expository or persuasive. Secondly, two paragraphs are given to the students to find out the mistakes in terms of coherence, unity, inconsistency and correct use of transitional signals. Finally, students are supposed to write down a certain type of a paragraph (Descriptive and Narrative, Expository and Persuasive). Accordingly, the researcher grades them in terms of the qualities mentioned earlier. NOTE: Students have the right to choose the topics that they are interested in.

2.2 Sample

The study is conducted on first-year students (evening and morning sessions) at the Department of English Language and Literature/ College of Arts/ Mustansiriyah University. The researcher does not put into consideration sex (male/female) and age (young/old) differences.

2.3 Data

The data of the study is based on responses collected from first-year students (evening and morning sessions).

2.3 Results

The practical part of the current study reveals the following results. They are listed below according to each step that is conducted in the practical part and as follows:

Step 1: Paragraph Types

As far as the first step is concerned, thirty out of forty students with the percentage of 75% managed to distinguish between types of paragraph, while 25% percentages of students failed to do so. It is to be mentioned that those ten students recognized descriptive and narrative paragraphs correctly only, but they did not do so with persuasive and expository paragraphs because they are not familiar with such types of paragraphs.

Step 2: Coherence, Unity and Consistency and Transitional Signals

In terms of coherence, unity and consistency; in both paragraphs, eleven out of forty students answered correctly, having the percentage of 27.5%, whereas 72.5% of the answers are wrong and ten sheets are left blank because students are informed not to make any sort of guessing.

Step 3: Paragraph Writing

This is the most important step of the test because it represents a proof that students really comprehend the variables “unity”, “coherence” and “transitional signals” without making any guessing. Not taking grammar rules, spelling, capitalization rules and punctuation marks rules into considerations, this step shows:

In terms of unity, 9.5% of the students' writing lack unity, while only 3% of the answers have unity.

Peace

“Many people and organizations want peace. One organization that was set up to bring peace among the nations.”

The paragraph above is one of the samples given by a student. It can be noted that this paragraph lacks unity because the sentences of which are not

closely interlinked. In other words, the topic sentence “Many people and organizations want peace” is not fully developed.

In terms of coherence, 98% of the students’ writings are incoherent, while only 2% of the answers have coherence.

“For me I’m going every day in the college and I meet me friend and teachers. I like the people is very beautiful in the afternoon I back the house and I write and read in the books lassins just that my day and go to sleep or wicking televisions.”

Not taking grammatical and spelling mistakes into account, the paragraph above has no logic. The sentences are arranged randomly, transitional signals are not employed, the sentences run roughly. Time expressions are not used.

In terms of transitional signals, taking only students who answered the last step; 90% of the students did not employ transitional signals, whereas only 10% did so. Students just arrange sentences haphazardly. This results in a lack of logic and makes a paragraph difficult to be understood. A vital example could be mentioned from one of the students’ pieces of writing. It is illustrated below and as follows.

Interview

“If you go to the interview, you should be take a taxi to go to the company. You should be early and ready. You should wear a suit and tie to look a formal and stylish. You should be take a pen to be need to interview to write a Not or information. Finally, when the interview ends you should say goodbye.”

Obviously, the student uses one transitional signal at the end of the paragraph which is “Finally”. This example could fit the lack of the two variables “coherence” and “inconsistency”. However, the paragraph is kind of coherent in the sense that the sentences are interlinked, but not closely, with one another.

“If you go to the interview, you should be take a taxi to go to the company. You should be early and ready. You should wear a suit and tie to look a formal and stylish. You should be take a pen to be need to interview to write a Not or information. Finally, when the interview ends you should say goodbye.”

٢,٤ Conclusions

The study ends up with the following concluding remarks:

١. Most students at Mustansiriyah University/ college of Arts/ Department of English language and literature/ First-year could recognize the descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive paragraphs, but when it comes to producing them they show a tendency to mix sorts of a paragraph. This is because there is a big gap between recognizing these types of a paragraph and producing them.
٢. Hand in hand with the statement made above, students also lack the knowledge of the qualities that make a paragraph better understood.
٣. In terms of processes of writing, most students, if not all, juxtapose ideas randomly. The result is a lack of coherence and consistency.

٢,٣ Pedagogical Remarks

١. Since writing is an ongoing process, so students need to do more practice on free writing without being too much worried about grammatical, spelling and punctuation rules.
٢. Teachers must encourage students to read about general topics that deal with English culture, traditions and norms of living so the bends of the mother-tongue language become less influential to the second language.
٣. Teachers need to focus on not only rules of grammar and punctuation, but also the qualities that make writing more understood and logical.
٤. Teacher should assign much time to practicing and less time to lecturing.
٥. Teachers should encourage students to write on topics that they are interested in using blogs, websites and social media.
٦. Most importantly, teachers need to employ the technique of scaffolding, teacher's talk and certain guides to keep students informed about the importance of the variables that make writing logical and understood.

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٣. <https://www.yabancidiller.kocaeli.edu.tr>

Appendices

Step 1

What is the type of each of the following paragraphs?

(1)

“A beach in Hawaii on a December day is like a day at a lake in mid-August. The beach smells fresh, almost like a new ocean breeze air freshener. The sand is hot and looks like gold blended in with little white specks; it sparkles like the water running off the swimmers back and feels like walking on coals from a burning grill. Not far from the shore, you can see the coral sitting still in the wild and shallow water. Turtles drift in to see all the people. The palm trees sway in the air from the forceful wind. In a distance, a house is beautifully placed right by the water, so it can look across the ocean each and every day. People are laughing and playing in the burning sand, and others are relaxing on the beach bronzing their skin while enjoying the bright rays of light coming from the sun. From a far distance the ocean is a deep navy blue; waves come in like a bulldozer from all the wind. At night everything is still. Waves are still coming in but not as hard, while the beach is cleared from all the people. All you can hear is the waves of the ocean and the light breeze coming from the giant palm trees. The beach is a spectacular place. Leaving it is excruciating and difficult to do.”

(2)

“The one day I spent in Morocco, Africa was an experience of a lifetime. When I finally reached Morocco and got off the bus, there were four little girls standing shoeless in the hot sun. After I swallowed my tears, I could not even try to picture this in America as it is not something you often see in the U.S. Meanwhile my tourist guide instructed me not to give them money as it encouraged the children to beg; however, I was wearing four silver bracelets. As I walked over to the girls, their eyes watched my every move. Then I kneeled down to their level while I gave each girl a bracelet. They stood there gleaming at me, for they were pleased. I felt completely in disbelief that this tiny gesture could mean so much. Though this experience was upsetting, and a huge culture shock, it will stay with me forever.”

(3)

“Going to college can be expensive. First, college tuition and room and board can cost anywhere from \$2,000 to more than \$10,000 per semester. Other expenses make going to college even more expensive. For example, books typically cost between \$100 and \$200 each term. Second, materials are also very expensive. Paper, notebooks, writing utensils, and other supplies required often cost more at the college bookstore than at any local discount department store. For instance, a package of notepaper costing \$2 at a discount store might cost \$20 at a college bookstore. Finally, there are all kinds of special fees added onto the bill at registration time. A college student might have to pay a \$20 insurance fee, a \$20 activity fee, a \$10 fee to the student government association and anywhere from \$200 to \$1000 for parking. There is another fee if a student decides to add or drop classes after registration. The fees required to attend college never seem to end.”

(4)

“Homework is an important part of the learning process in middle school. One reason is that homework gives students additional practice of skills covered in class. Middle school classes are too short to teach a new concept and practice it sufficiently for students to master. Students need both guided practice in class and independent practice at home. Another reason for homework is that it provides time to complete longer assignments. For example, the ideal composition process allows time for students to think and to reflect on their ideas, as well as time to revise and to proofread their writing. Also, reports and special projects often require research that cannot always be done at school. In addition, since all students do not work at the same speed, giving students time at home to finish work keeps them from falling behind. Finally, the most important reason for homework is that it ensures review. New material and old material are practiced in daily assignments. Students who do their homework daily are prepared for tests and make better grades. In conclusion, not only is homework essential to mastering new skills and maintaining previously learned skills, but it also guarantees constant review and provides time for longer assignments, as well as additional time for students who need it. Students, do your daily homework, make better grades, and learn more!”

Step 2

Find the mistakes in the following paragraphs in terms of coherence.

“Monticello- a Famous Site”

“One of the most famous houses in the United States is Monticello. Monticello was the home of Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States. Located on a hill in Virginia, Monticello has a beautiful view of the surrounding countryside. Monticello is famous, first of all, because Monticello belonged to a president. Monticello is also a fine example of early nineteenth-century American architecture. Jefferson designed Monticello himself in a style he had lived in Italy. Perhaps, these two reasons make Monticello a very much appreciated house.”

“The Benefits of Running”

“Running has many positive effects on the body. First of all, it increases the efficiency of the heart and lungs. For example, it helps lower blood pressure and prevents heart attacks. As another example, thanks to it, lungs deliver more oxygen to the cells and breathing is easier. Secondly, it helps people lose fat and become fit. To illustrate, it allows a person to burn 1000 calories each mile he or she runs. Finally, it helps the body become more mechanically efficient. For example, it helps to develop and tone muscles in the arms, legs, back, neck and shoulders. In summary, it results in people being healthy.”

Step 3

Write a paragraph on a topic that you are interested in.