

# An In-Depth Analysis of Saudi EFL Students' Written Paragraphs at Al-Baha University

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**Abstract**—This study aimed to give an in-depth analysis of students' written paragraphs. Therefore, the study primarily described the nature of the grammatical and mechanical problems that the undergraduate students committed at the paragraph level. Paragraphs written by EFL undergraduate students were analyzed comprehensively. The study adopted a qualitative method approach in which 80 students were asked to write a paragraph. The study found that undergraduate students had many grammatical problems as well as mechanical ones in a paragraph. The major grammatical problems included the use of tenses, pronouns, conjunctions, the use of prepositions, and the use of verbs, whereas the mechanical ones included the use of capitalization, the use of punctuation marks, cursive writing, spelling mistakes, and initiating a paragraph. These problems affected the paragraph's readability as well as its comprehension. Therefore, it is suggested to give ample time for the students to practice writing prior to university entry. Also, literature should be included in secondary school to provide learners with the necessary words and improve their expressive skills.

**Index Terms**—grammatical problems, mechanical difficulties, EFL students, paragraph composition

## I. INTRODUCTION

In this age of proliferation of knowledge and advancement of technology, different means of social media are used by students to communicate their messages. One of the benefits of these is gaining knowledge and skills about how to express their opinions and how to perform in the academic arena. Therefore, academic writing is considered to be a main source of students' success in colleges and universities and on which the students' final product can be assessed and examined.

It feels difficult and burdensome to write when the environment is English as a Foreign Language. This is due to the fact that many fields place an emphasis only on completing written projects and reports for classes. However, despite the many years of teaching expertise that have been accumulated, it has been observed that many college students continue to struggle with creating paragraphs that are cohesive and logically connected to one another (Alharbi, 2018; Al-Zabeiry, 2020). Writing paragraphs is only a fundamental component that students should already be familiar with from their time in the intermediate and secondary levels of education. Therefore, before enrolling in the university level courses, the students have had prior knowledge of what to write and how to create paragraphs. This is due to the fact that the capacity to grasp and communicate ideas is of the utmost significance in the environment of the university, which is used to evaluate the students' final work. As a result of this, it is necessary for the researcher to:

- 1- Explain and make a note of the grammatical and mechanical issues that impact paragraph composition, as well as
- 2- Provide suggestions about how these issues might be managed.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing at the university is important for teaching and learning. This is because different academic purposes can be fulfilled by this method. For example, essays are written by learners for the purpose of demonstrating their mastery in specific disciplines, and teachers use the same to assess learners' essays, focusing on content and form. Similarly, awareness may be obtained when learners are asked to write essays that reflect their abilities to present their personal thoughts, ideas, and reasons (Dewle, 2009). By so doing, any weakness in academic writing can affect students' standards, and low grades will be expected.

Javid et al. (2013) have investigated the major areas of difficulty in academic writing done by Saudi EFL learners. Via a questionnaire, 194 Saudi male and female EFL learners studying at Taif University participated to report their viewpoints on the difficulties they face in writing. Their study has concluded that Saudi EFL learners' problems with academic writing include both major and minor ones. The major ones include weaknesses in the use of appropriate lexical items as well as organization of ideas and grammar, whereas the minor ones include the use of wrong prepositions, spellings, irregular verbs, articles, punctuation, suffixes, and prefixes.

Alharbi's (2018) study on the difficulties of Saudi postgraduate students' English academic writing in an English-speaking country, in which 275 students filled out a questionnaire and nine were interviewed, the quantitative analysis revealed that postgraduate students suffered from a lack of sufficient academic vocabulary; they did not avoid plagiarism or misuse of cohesive devices; they did not construct arguments logically; they lacked coherence; and there was no demonstration of critical thinking in their academic writing.

Similarly, in her research entitled 'Problems of English Paragraph Structure in the Writing of Female Students at Albaha University', Al-Zahrani collected written documents from 20 female English-major students, aiming to see the most common writing problems at the paragraph level. By using content analysis and frequency percentages, her study found that students had problems in the writing of topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences, coupled with inappropriate use of transitions to connect the supporting sentences (Al-Zahrani, 2018).

Alkhathlan (2019) identified the type and frequency of metadiscourse markers used in fifty research articles written by Saudi EFL college students. The research found significant differences in the frequency of such markers. More interactive metadiscourse markers were used by the students than interactional ones. The research also showed the frequent use of transitions in the research articles, followed by hedges, whereas endophoric markers and attitude markers were the least frequently used markers.

On a similar note, Alzamil's (2020) study sought to investigate the writing errors made by Saudi foreign language English learners. The participants of this study were twenty-four male English-major Saudi university students (age ranges between 19 and 22). Their 48 written compositions were collected and analyzed manually. The researcher's analysis concluded that the students had writing errors: errors in the use of capitalization, errors in spelling, and the use of articles.

Additionally, in the study conducted in a New Zealand university by Ankawi (2020), in which 10 Saudi students' views and perceptions on their academic writing challenges were stated, the qualitative method came out to conclude that the attitude of Saudi students was not positive in learning and using the English language as a result of teaching English, which affected their preparation to study through the English language.

Since undergraduate English-major students possess the basic idea of finding sources for their research topics, reviewing literature to contextualize their study, and preparing notes and references for the study, Qayoom and Saleem's (2020) empirical study has shown that Saudi undergraduate English major students were found to be weak in academic writing, mainly, in the area of research essays.

Above that, Al-Zubeiry's (2020) paper investigated the problems of coherence in the English writings of Saudi male and female students at Albaha University. Through a descriptive analytical approach, a corpus of 30 students' scripts was analyzed using Bamberg's (1984) analytical coherence. His research findings revealed that students had writing coherence problems. These include the inability of students to write an idea-focused text, the impact of Arabic rhetorical traditions, their ignorance of the systematic organization of information in text, the inappropriate usage of conjunctions, the misuse of references and lexical items, and their low proficiency in English to construct correct sentences.

Progressing on writing challenges, Khasawneh's paper studied the types of writing tasks that were produced by Saudi EFL learners and explored the challenges in writing encountered by those students. A questionnaire was given to 261 students randomly chosen from three different colleges. The research found that essays for exams, synthesis papers, and reflection papers were the most frequent writing tasks done by the students. This is coupled with the most frequent challenges, such as paragraph organization, the use of proper connections and transitions, and the inability to keep the flow of writing that the students face (Khasawneh, 2021).

Alshammari's (2022) study also identified the reasons behind the poor performance of Saudi EFL learners in their English courses by including all major stakeholders. The researcher conducted interviews with educational consultants, six university teachers, six graduate students, and six high school teachers, and disseminated a questionnaire to 100 high school students. His analysis has shown a gap between the theories consultants used to set class objectives and their actual practice. The gap is said to be a deficit on the part of consultants or their evaluation of people in the field.

Based on the above, some studies focused on investigating students' essays as a whole (Alkhathlan, 2019; Alzamil, 2020; Ankawi, 2020; Qayoom & Saleem, 2020; Al-Zubeiry's, 2020; Al-Nafjan & Alhawsawi, 2022), while other studies focused on questionnaires and interviews to see the participants' views and perceptions on writing problems (Javid et al., 2013; Alharbi, 2018; Khasawneh, 2021 & Alshammari, 2022). Of these, only Al-Zahrani's (2018) study focused on investigating a limited number of major-English-language students' paragraphs. Since the paragraph is considered the cornerstone of essay writing. This gives the researcher an impetus to carry out an in-depth analysis of EFL students' paragraphs, aiming to analyze and describe the nature of these problems and suggest ways to control them.

### III. METHOD

The paper used a qualitative method as the primary instrument to give an in-depth analysis of the students' paragraphs. By using such a method, the assessment of students' written performance can be better analyzed, and gaps can be seen.

#### *Subjects:*

Participants were 80 male Saudi undergraduates enrolled in an English language course at the College of Business Administration, Al-Baha University during the academic year 1443–1444. The 18–19-year-olds who applied full-time were freshmen.

#### *Procedure:*

Students were to write a paragraph about their lives. Therefore, during class time, students were instructed on how to

write it using some guided questions. Students were given enough time to complete their writing assignments before the due date. The researcher studied those sections to look for evidence of the issues mentioned.

#### *Data Analysis:*

Students' paragraphs were analyzed manually (See Alzamil, 2020) to identify and describe the nature of the different grammatical and mechanical problems that the EFL students committed. Accordingly, some paragraphs and extracts were selected as a sample to describe these problems. So, students' problems were explained using braces, and the same was used by the researcher to correct or explain what the students should do.

### IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of student scripts reveals widespread errors in paragraph construction by undergraduate EFL students. There are two key challenges that stand out: the students' grammar errors and their mechanical difficulties.

#### A. Grammatical Problems

##### *Problems with forming correct sentences:*

According to an examination of student writing samples, EFL students lack the grammatical competence to produce coherent paragraphs (Mudawy & Mousa, 2017; Alharbi, 2018; Al-Zabeiry, 2020). As a result, it has been determined that the vast majority of students are not adequately versed in either parts of speech or the fundamental building blocks of sentences. Different issues were flagged since the main phrase (which is then reinforced by other related sentences) is the initial component of writing paragraphs (Al-Zahrani, 2018). Following this part, we will examine the following issues alongside the scripts of a few deserving students:

In the first place, several of the sentences were said to be cut off or left hanging (Alsalamy, 2022). In addition, it has been shown that the majority of students are unaware that a proper sentence must include both a subject and a predicate. The inability to correctly identify and write the sentence's topic is a common issue amongst certain students (Al-Zahrani, 2018). The phrase "...go to Al baha university...", extracted from Script No. 1, is a whole thought. Therefore, the statement is unfinished since it lacks a necessary component to make it a full English sentence.

The problem of double-subject constructions is another area of interest. This occurs often in their paragraphs. This is reflected in the second script:

*My name is Ahmed. I am 20 years old. I {am study} in AL- Bha University. I have one brother and one sister. {My brother his name} same and {his 19 years old} and {my sister she} is name is Suhlime and she is 17 years old. I live with my grandmother in AL-Bha city. {My parents do teachers}. I am not married.*

In the above extract, the constructions *My brother his name* and *my sister she* showed that the students did not understand the structure of the subject, which in turn has a negative impact on sentence structure. This can be described as the effect of mother tongue on the use of the target language during academic writing (Ankawi, 2020).

Other sentential issues include students' misuse of verbs. This one revealed the use of two main verbs. For example, in the second script, the construction, *I am study*, indicated lack of knowledge in the use of verbs. To explain this, the writer did not know that *am* and *study* are two main verbs. If such learner understands the nature of verbs, he would have chosen the construction *I am studying* or *I study*.

The most difficult verbal issues for many students were the use of *be*, *have*, and *do*. To be illustrated, in script NO. 2, the construction *my parents do teachers*, the verb *do* was wrongly used instead of the correct verb *are*. Similarly, some students ignored to include the required verb in order to write a complete sentence. To exemplify, the construction *my parents teacher my mother teacher* as extracted from script NO. 3 showed that the students did not know that an essential verb (*be*) should be used between the subject and the complement. So, the sentence is described as incomplete because a nucleus of the sentence is missing.

Other forms of sentential problems many undergraduate students had on their paragraphs contain the incorrect use of tenses. Accordingly, many students had problems with what tense to use, present or past. These problems have affected sentence understandability. Since the learners were instructed to use the present tense, some of them wrongly mix use of past and present tenses. The example, (...I went to Al Baha University... as extracted from script NO. 4) showed the use of past simple tense instead of the present form. This is described as lack of knowledge in the choice of tenses for expressing present and past events. This one, in turn, has its negative effect in their final product.

Apart from misuse of verbs and tenses, the use of the plural morpheme *-s*, also, remained an issue needs to be described. The following example stated that some students had problems in understanding and using the plural forms. In other ways, the use of singular and plural nouns appears to be cumbersome for most of them. Script NO. 5 below explains this:

*Hi, My name is saad Hamza Ali I'm 18 years old I go to university Baha, I have {1 brothers} and {1 sisters} his {nems} is Ali and rameh. I live with my mom and my dad and where? Baha. my parents do not work. and I'm not married.*

Based on the above, the number *1* is used with the plural forms *brothers* and *sisters* respectively. Not only this issue but also the use of subject(s) with verb(s) to construct a sentence is coming under the problems which many undergraduate EFL students confront, for instance, (...My parents do teachers... as extracted from script NO. 2).

##### *Problems with conjunctions:*

Paragraphs were also analysed for the use of conjunctions. In this concern, it is observed that some students repeated the same conjunction, underused them, or misused some of these. Students' paragraphs lacked cohesion because of the inappropriate use of conjunctions between sentences (Javid et al., 2013; Al-Zabeiry, 2020).

To begin with, in the analysis of the students' scripts, it was shown that some students missed to use the conjunction *and* in its suitable place to join two parallel words, for example, (as extracted from script NO. 6, *I study and university Al Baha*), the conjunction *and* is used to link a verb and a noun which is found to contradict the usual norm. This comes as a result of ignorance of both, use of conjunction and knowledge of parts of speech.

Moreover, many scripts lacked use of the required conjunctions between sentences. Script NO. 7 in the following illustrated the use of no conjunctions at all to link sentences together:

*mi name is maged i am 18 yoris i go to Al baha university I have two brthers who are students in school I live with my family*

Another example showed that some students resorted to repeat the same conjunction to join different sentences in a paragraph. Look at the example below:

*My name is abdulrazzag saeed ali and i am 18 go and i study at university of baha and i live with my Family in baljurashi and i study business adminestration and i am not married (Script NO. 8).*

The above paragraph explained that the conjunction *and* is repeated so as to join a group of sentences together even though no periods between sentences can be seen. This way of writing reflects the way of speaking rather than in writing (Ankawi, 2020). To reiterate, many students had conjunction problems (Khasawneh, 2021). Problems of conjunctions include misuse of conjunctions, overuse of them, underuse of some of them, and the use of no conjunctions at all.

The problem to distinguish between a subject pronoun and the possessive adjective was also described. For example, some students were found not able to differentiate between *he's* and *his* (See the second script above). In the construction, *His 19 years old*, the student was unaware that a correct sentence needs a subject *he* and a copular verb *is*. The wrong choice of the possessive adjective *his* instead of the correct pronoun *he* rendered the sentence to be ungrammatical.

#### *Problems with prepositions:*

Problems of sentence structure, in addition, include the use of prepositions. Analysis of paragraphs revealed that students had problems with the use of prepositions as these are suitable to understand a sentence. For instance, look at script NO. 9 below, the required prepositions to be included are enclosed between braces.

*Hi my name tarig alomari my old 19 yers my university AL Baha my brothers 3 and my sisters 6*

*I live with my frends and a stay {in} Al Bahah {with}my mom she a job a tetshar and father a job a tetsher and a bisnis man and I do not married*

The use of no prepositions has its effect on sentence structure. This is because a prepositional phrase is an essential sentence part that adds to the meaning of a sentence. So, this issue was clearly seen in the example above (Javid et al., 2013).

In short, EFL students' paragraphs had many sentential problems. These include the use of tenses, verbs, use of prepositions, pronouns, plural forms, and the use of two subjects coupled with problems of subject- verb agreement. Sentential problems coupled with jumbled unorganized sentences affected the flow of information (Al-Zabeiry, 2020) as a result of mingling more than one sentence together. Such problems weaken students' paragraphs' quality.

### *B. Mechanical Difficulties*

The mechanical problems, in turn, have to do with handwriting problems that affect sentence organization. Previous studies stated that students did not know how to write organized ideas (Javid et al., 2013; Al-Zabeiry, 2020). The following sections discuss these.

#### *Handwriting difficulties:*

Most of the subjects had problems with handwriting. Paragraphs' analysis revealed major challenging issues in the writings of EFL students (Khasawneh, 2021). Such issues include punctuation problems, spelling mistakes, cursive writing, and inability to start a paragraph.

#### *Difficulties with punctuation marks:*

Since punctuation marks are like sign posts to organize sentences and ideas in a paragraph, absence of them makes one's paragraph looks floppy and scattered. So, it makes it difficult to know where one sentence starts and where it ends as a group of sentences were written without periods. Therefore, many problems can be identified. Script NO.9 below showed misuse of periods, misuse or underuse of capitalization, and underuse of commas.

*Hi {,} my name {T} tarig alomari {,} {M} my old 19 yers {,} {M}my university AL Baha {,} {M} my brothers 3 and my sisters 6 {,}*

*I live with my frends and a stay Al Bahah my mom {,} {S} she a job a tetshar and my father a job a tetsher and a bisnis man and I do not married {,}*

Based on the above paragraph, some students had major problems concerning applying the required punctuation marks. Firstly, no periods are used at all to identify sentence boundaries coupled with problems in the use of capitalization. Most of the students' sentences did not show any element of capitalization from the beginning to the end of these sentences (Javid et al., 2013; Al-Zhrani, 2018; and Alzamil, 2020). Missing to use the required punctuation

mark affects comprehensibility of sentences because paragraph writing is, solely, based on forming correct sentences.

Similarly, students repeatedly use small cases for writing names of people, for example, *tarig* in the above paragraph. No use of punctuation marks causes a continuous stream of sentences which result in paragraph's incomprehensibility. This is what was clearly seen in scripts NO. 8 and NO. 9. In addition to that, the small case *i* was used in different situations to mean the first personal pronoun *I* which is not the usual norm for writing it. In the example below, the small case *i*, was used throughout the paragraph.

*My name is abdulrazzag saeed ali and i am 18 go and i study at university of baha and i live with my Family in baljurashi and i study business adminestration and i am not married* (Script NO. 8).

The above paragraph illustrated serious problems in the use of capitalization (See Alzamil, 2020). This is because many students did not know when and what to capitalize as most students confuse between *I* as a pronoun and the letter *i*. As a result of this, handwritten assignments have become a burden on teachers who exert a great deal of time to rephrase what the student needs to express or say. This is a real issue that needs to be taken into consideration in the academic arena.

#### *Spelling mistakes:*

Although spelling is an important aspect in the writing skill, many undergraduate students had problems with it (Javid et al., 2013; Alzamil, 2020). This factor is worth noting because the assignment given was easy as the words needed to be included in their paragraphs were simple. To exemplify, words, like *friend*, *teacher*, *mam*, *Bahah*, etc. just to mention some of these, were found wrongly spelled. Script NO. 9 portrays some of these problems:

*Hi my name tarig alomari my old 19 {yers} my university AL Baha my brothers 3 and my sisters 6  
I live with my {friends} and a stay Al {Bahah} my {mam} she a job a {tetshar} and my father a job a {tetsher}  
and a {bisnis} man and I do not married*

In spite of many years of English language instruction, EFL students' paragraphs contained several spelling mistakes (Mudawy & Mousa, 2017). Although the topic of the paragraph and the suggested words are simple, many students failed to give the correct spelling of these words (Javid et al., 2013; Alzamil, 2020). These problems happened as a result of students' weakness in reading English materials or to their weakness in English proficiency as general (Ankawi, 2020; Al-Zabeiry, 2020 respectively).

#### *Cursive writing:*

One of the major issues in EFL writing context is cursive writing. In this study, it is discovered that undergraduate students were unable to join letters of a single word together. This is coupled with big spaces between the letters of the same word. For example, *I go to albaha University* (as extracted from script NO. 1), showed big gaps between letters of a single word. This problem makes it difficult to read handwritten assignments. Such issue reflects shortage in giving them enough handwriting training which enables them perform better at this stage.

#### *Not able to start a paragraph:*

A paragraph should be started with a topic sentence. It is a complete statement that carries meaning and points to what follows. However, many undergraduate students were discovered unable to start their paragraphs. To explain this, some students began their sentences using cardinal numbers. For instance, 1- mshal Qazzan Al-ghamdi (as extracted from script No. 10), was used as an initial sentence to start a paragraph.

All in all, absence or ignorance of using and applying the mechanics of writing affected paragraph's quality. This is because in a writing class many students pay no attention to the basics of paragraph writing. Due to the different grammatical and mechanical problems, many paragraphs were found unreadable and incomprehensible.

## V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

In this study we analyze the grammatical and mechanical difficulties that male Saudi undergraduates have while composing paragraphs. The paragraph suffers from several issues with sentence form, including incorrect usage of tenses, verbs, subjects, plurals, prepositions, and possessive pronouns. Capitalization, punctuation, sentence structure, spelling errors, and cursive handwriting are other factors that detract from its overall quality. Therefore, it is suggested that students be given more time to develop writing skills, both at the intermediate and secondary levels, prior to university enrollment and that literature be included in the secondary school curriculum. Literature enriches classrooms by equipping pupils with better vocabulary and more facility in verbal expression. It's possible that they might help EFL students improve their overall writing.

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