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Paragraph Writing of Academic Texts in an EFL Context

ABSTRACT

This study aims to figure out EFL students' experiences in developing paragraphs and difficulties in writing paragraphs of academic texts. This current study was qualitative research which employed interviews as the data collection method. The participants of the study were five students who were writing their research report as a requirement for their undergraduate degree. The study was conducted in one of private universities in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The findings of the study showed that in developing paragraphs, the students did brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing. Moreover, related to the problems in writing paragraph, the students faced difficulties in English words and word choice, grammar, development of main idea, coherence and cohesiveness, effective sentence, and citation.

Keywords: paragraph development, paragraph writing, academic text

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a kind of writing important in academic field. Academic writing is a type of writing that is specifically used for academic purposes (Yakhontova, 2003). Paper, journal article, thesis, and dissertation are examples of academic writings. They are developed in specific standards and refer to certain formats of writing. Academic writings are useful for academic fulfillment, academic development, and self-actualization in academic

area (Rao, 2007). More specifically, academic writing is important to understand students' disciplines, support the students' learning and establish the students' career.

In the process of academic writing, there are some requirements that students should fulfil. In academic writing, the students refer to theories and use logical thinking as requirements to come up with theoretical truth (Yakhontova, 2003). The

theories provide the basis of what is believed to be the truth from the previous studies. It is then proven by providing facts from the data gathered and relating them with theories. Paragraphs are useful to deliver theories and findings to be discussed to achieve scientific truth.

A good paragraph is essential in academic writing. A good paragraph is critical as it helps the readers to understand the content of the writing. Coherent paragraph results in sufficient development of main idea reflected by appropriate supporting sentences, which will help readers find the main idea and supporting details of the paragraph. Moreover, cohesion among paragraphs is also essential to build a bind among paragraphs. It shows the readers the unity of the paragraph.

Knowledge of developing a paragraph is very important for students especially in academic writing. They need to make sure that the language used in developing the paragraph is correct, formal, systematic, and suitable with academic nature. Moreover, sentences should be arranged in such a way so that it results in good comprehension to the readers. Academic features such as citation and writing format are also important to be taken into consideration by the students to meet the academic requirements.

Although a paragraph only consists of one main idea, the development of a paragraph is sometimes difficult to achieve. Writers should consider some aspects of a paragraph to build them into a good paragraph. Vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, cohesion, and coherence are among the aspects requiring attention in paragraph writing. The words used in paragraph should be correct and suitable to represent the idea. In addition, the para-

graph should fulfill language rules in term of grammar. Moreover, authors have to make sure that each sentence is correctly constructed. The last, each sentence in a paragraph should be interconnected to other sentences and each paragraph should also connect to other paragraphs.

In writing an academic text, EFL students should put more efforts than L1 students. In writing a paragraph, EFL students potentially face more challenges than first language (L1) learners (Hussen, 2015). Both of them may share similar difficulties related to the writing format and mechanic. However, students of English as foreign language face more difficulties in composing academic text than L1 students (Yakhontova, 2003). EFL students are likely to have more difficulties in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure.

The objective of this study is to investigate how students develop paragraphs and identify problems in writing paragraphs of academic texts. In EFL contexts, academic writing requires the students to use a foreign language, proper academic format and standard, and other paragraph writing requirements. Those requirements make EFL students have more challenges in academic writing than L1 students, and they potentially make academic writing more difficult to accomplish.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing

There are some factors which influence successful writing. Kellogg (2001) argued that successful writing depends on the ability of the writer to retrieve and apply relevant procedures, schemas, facts and episodes through working memory. Writing requires the writers to follow certain

rules and procedures to meet the standard of good writing composition. In addition, writing also requires them to consider how the ideas are elaborated and connected one another.

In an EFL context, writing benefits students in some ways. Rao (2007) mentioned the importance of writing in EFL context as it motivates students to organize ideas, analyze, criticize and develop the ability to summarize. In addition, it strengthens students' ability in reflecting, thinking, and learning the language. Writing specifically helps the students produce the language by developing and connecting the ideas in writing product. They may analyze, criticize and summarize the topic or theme being discussed. Since writing is a productive skill, it makes students to be creative and critical in composing the language.

Academic Writing

Academic writing simply means writing for academic purposes. Academic writing, more specifically undergraduate thesis, is a writing work done by the students in their study accomplishment process. In Indonesia, it is the requirement for the undergraduate degree. The students usually get the preparation class for academic writing. It will help them learn about academic writing and how to make it.

Writing an academic text is not a simple matter, especially for L2 students. Many L2 students find it hard to write their academic writing into a proper form (Hussen, 2015). Hussen stated that more problems occur because of their lack of familiarity with the conventions and expectations of academic writing in English medium universities. Moreover, Al-Khasawneh (2010) stated that courses where students

learn academic writing do not successfully prepare students to write academic writing.

Paragraph Development

It is essential for students to understand a paragraph before they actually write it. Oshima and Hogue (2006) stated that paragraph is basic unit of organization in writing group-related sentences which consists of two kinds of sentences: a topic sentence and supportive statements. The number of the supporting sentences of a paragraph is not fixed but they should be sufficient to develop main idea clearly. Owl (2009) clarified a paragraph as a group of closely-related sentences which deal with and develop one idea.

Paragraph has been written to help the readers obtain the piece of information of the writing. Paragraph helps the readers comprehend the information within the main idea and relate it to the other paragraphs. Mayers (2006) stated that there are three important parts of a paragraph. The first part is introduction. It contains a topic sentence which outlines the main idea of a paragraph to which the rest of the paragraph should be focused. A topic sentence usually occurs in the beginning of the paragraph but it sometimes occurs in other positions such as in the middle or at the end of the paragraph. The second part is the body. It contains supporting sentences which develop the main idea by giving examples, details, and explanations. The third part is conclusion. It occurs at the end of the paragraph. It emphasizes the point of the paragraph to be emphasized by the readers. It usually has the sense of finality.

There are elements of a paragraph that determine the quality of the paragraph. Paragraph should have three main elements to be achieved i.e. unity, coherence and adequate development (Nunan in Khairy, 2013). The first is unity. It is about oneness of the idea. To have a unity, a paragraph should be developed by only one main idea. The main idea is then developed by sufficient supporting details from at least two or more sentences. A main idea is used to control unity of the paragraph by its topic sentence. In addition, supporting details are used to develop the topic sentence by giving more explanation to it. They have to be sufficient enough to develop the topic sentence in order to give the readers good comprehension of the paragraph.

The second element is coherence. It is the connection among sentences within the paragraph. Coherence can be achieved by having transitional words and phrases, pronoun reference, repeated key terms and parallelism. Boardman and Frydenberg (2002) stated that there are many ways to make paragraph coherence. One of the ways is to use linking words. Coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, prepositions, and transitions are common types of linking words. They are useful to link sentences to one another.

Adequate development is the last element of a paragraph to be achieved. A paragraph should be fully developed and it doesn't leave any significant questions to the readers. An author can ensure the adequate development of the paragraph by providing right level of supporting details, choosing right kind of evidence, and having the right pattern of development.

Writing a paragraph is the beginning of the writing process which has some proce-

dures to follow. There are some procedures of paragraph writing proposed by Hussen (2015) i.e. brainstorming, planning, drafting, revising, and editing.

Brainstorming. Brainstorming is the initial step of paragraph writing. It is idea-collecting technique which functions as the organizer of thinking and idea collector. It is included as pre-writing activity. Oshima and Hogue (2006) suggested that the more time writers spend on pre-writing activity, the more successful their writings will be. Brainstorming can be in the form of list, free writing and mind mapping (Zemach & Rumisek, 2005). Brainstorming enables writers to gather any possible ideas for the paragraph which are then sorted and organized.

Planning. Planning as the second step is done after the writer finishes brainstorming. Planning is when the writers outline their ideas and bring them into note form. Planning is the procedure after brainstorming is done to select relevant ideas to be developed into paragraph (Zemach & Rumisek, 2005). Planning is useful to organize and classify the ideas gathered in brainstorming. Planning helps the writers to establish paragraph unity that will give the readers introductory idea about the main topic of the paragraph (Cumming, 2006). It is useful to put the ideas into right order and build the connection between the ideas.

Drafting. Drafting is the third step in writing a paragraph. Drafting is the process of writing when the writers write down their ideas on paper focusing on the content, and not mechanism (Hussen, 2015). When writing the first draft, students should discover further ideas to be added to the paragraph (Cumming,

2006). It is very hard to have good paragraph in the first writing. There is always draft developed as the first writing. Drafting is the initial product of paragraph in which writers can put or add more ideas or even omit some irrelevant ideas. The emphasis of the drafting process is the content so that students do not need to revise the paragraph related to vocabulary and grammar used.

Revising. The fourth step of paragraph writing is revising. Cumming (2006) pointed out that revising is considered as the heart of writing process, the means by which idea emerge and evolve and meanings are clarified. Revising means students examine whether ideas are well built and arranged. In this step, students take a closer look on how the sequences of ideas are presented. They should activate their logic to determine how the paragraph is developed.

Editing. The step when students check and correct the paragraph as the final version is called editing. It can be viewed as the process of correcting the sentence structure, word choice, spelling, punctuation, grammar, capitalization in a piece of writing (Hussen,2015). It is the step in which students pay attention to details of the paragraph. The development of ideas is not the concern in this step. It is done after revising process.

Since academic writing requires systematic development of the arrangements, steps to develop the writing should be carefully done by the author. Having different procedures may result in inconsistency and redundancy.

Paragraph Writing Problems

Academic writing in EFL context is still

challenging for many students. The issue is that it requires students to refer to academic writing system and use second language (L2). Hailemariam's study (2011) found that L2 writers have several problems in writing such as vocabulary selections, punctuation error, generating idea, organizing problems, spelling errors and appropriate grammar usage.

In writing an academic text, EFL students potentially face some problems. Related to the influencing factor of academic writing problems, Hailemariam (2011) stated that the possible causes of students' problems in EFL paragraph writing are inadequate exposure of target language, lack of practice, problem in writing apprehension, lack of appropriate feedback, lack of vocabulary, and carelessness.

Another study by Abdulkareem (2013) toward Arab students in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia found that the difficulties in developing paragraph include vocabulary, spelling, structure of sentences, and idea development. Vocabulary is the most problems faced by the students in developing paragraph followed by spelling, structure of sentences, and idea development.

The last study by Thananart (2000) examined errors in comparison and contrast paragraphs written by EFL university students at Chulalongkorn University. The study found that problems in writing paragraph included grammatical structure, transition signals, verb forms, word choice, and spelling.

METHODOLOGY

This study is descriptive qualitative research which specifically examined the

scope of paragraph development of academic writing. It covered how students develop paragraphs and identified problems occurred in the process of paragraph writing. The participants of the study were five students of English Education Department in a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The participants were writing their undergraduate thesis as a requirement for their undergraduate degree. It is in the form of a research-based report. The study used interview as data collection method. Five participants were chosen as research participants, and it was sufficient for researcher to do interviews when additional interviews or participants did not result in identification of new concepts or data were saturated (Creswell, 2012).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data taken from the interview to students, there are some findings related to how the students develop paragraphs. The findings showed that they did brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing in the process of writing paragraphs.

Brainstorming

As the first step in paragraph development procedure, brainstorming is essential to collect the ideas. There was only one student did brainstorming. The purpose was to gather idea as much as possible. However, the other students begin the paragraph development by composing main idea and it is followed by supporting sentences.

“I usually write what I think to be relevant for my paragraph. Sometimes it works to develop the idea. It can be anything. It is just like random thought” (P1.1).

Brainstorming is essential as it allows writers to have numerous ideas for the

paragraph. Hussen (2015) stated that if writers do not do the brainstorming, the ideas in the paragraph are not rich and sometimes insufficient.

Drafting

The third step is drafting. The main focus of the drafting is the content of the paragraph. All five students did drafting in their paragraph development. They wrote the paragraph based on the main idea by giving supporting sentences. They directly did this by writing on the computer.

“My first draft is written in my computer. For me it is easier than to do this on a piece of paper” (P1.2).

“What I always do is I write the main idea and supporting sentences on the computer. It is easier for me to do it directly from the computer” (P2.1).

“I usually make my first draft in the computer. I just write whatever I want to write” (P3.1).

Drafting is initial writing product written by students as their first writing. The study found that it became the first procedure of paragraph writing.

Revising

Revising is the fourth step after drafting is done. The emphasis of the revising is about the content of the paragraph. In this phase, the findings found that two students did this procedure. They did revising by checking whether the writing is well written in terms of idea development and giving correction to the idea

development.

“Soon after I finished the draft, I reread the sentences to make sure that the paragraph makes sense” (P1.3).

“Sometimes what I write is not good. There is usually confusion about the idea development. That is why I often make revision to the idea development” (P2.2).

The finding showed that two students revised their writing in terms of idea development. One student did revising because of his intention to have a good paragraph. He wanted to have a good paragraph; therefore, he reread what he had written. Another student did revising because of her awareness that her writing ability was not good. Hence, she frequently did revision to her writing.

Editing

The next step is editing. It is the phase where the students edited their sentence structure, word choice, spelling, punctuation, grammar, and capitalization. All five students did this in their paragraph development. They did it by themselves, by looking up in the dictionary, asking friends, or hiring a proofreader to help them in editing. The study also found that it was the main concern of their paragraph development.

“Editing is very important. I usually check the grammar by myself. Sometimes, I also ask my friend to check the sentence structure. It is always useful to have second person to read the paragraph” (P1.4).

“I am a reckless person. Actually, I know the correct form but I always write something wrong in my paragraph. It can be about grammar, punctuation and spelling. Sometimes I ask my friends to revise them

or I use grammar checker in the computer” (P2.2).

“I am a very bad writer. I do not have a good ability in writing. I need someone to edit my paragraph. I always make grammatical mistakes” (P3.2).

“Honestly I am not good at writing. But I know that grammar is important. I check my writing if it has grammatical mistakes. Even though I already checked the grammar, my supervisor still finds many grammatical mistakes in my writing” (P4.2).

“Well, my concern is on the grammar. I work a lot on the grammar. I always check my grammar” (P5.2).

Editing is among the last steps in writing a paragraph. The interview uncovered information that editing was the most frequently used procedure that the writers chose. Moreover, it was found that students felt inferior about their ability to do editing by the fact that only few of them did self-correction. Even though few students did self-correction, it failed as there were still many grammatical mistakes in their writing after they did editing. Beside self-correction, other students used other sources, such as grammar checker, friends, and proofreader that helped them in editing the paragraphs.

To sum up, the findings showed that in developing paragraphs the students did brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing. Related to brainstorming as one of pre-activities in writing done by students, Oshima and Hogue (2006) suggested that the more time writers spend on pre-writing activity, the more successful their writings will be. It implies that brainstorming helps the students make good paragraphs and be successful in writing. Plan

ning is essential in the writing process as it helps the writers to establish paragraph unity that will give the readers introductory idea about the main topic of the paragraph (Cumming, 2006). As the findings found that the students did not do any planning, their writings will potentially lack paragraph unity. Drafting is the process of paragraph writing when the writers write down their ideas on paper focusing on the content, and not mechanism (Hussen, 2015). All students did drafting in their paragraph writing process. Cumming (2006) suggested that students should add further ideas while making draft. Moreover, Cumming also pointed out that revising, as the next step, is considered the heart of writing process, the means by which ideas emerge and evolve, and meanings are clarified. Two students did revising in writing paragraphs. Revising is very important, especially to improve the idea development in paragraph writing. Mustaque (2014) stated that it is often found that students may have good knowledge about vocabulary and grammatical aspects (e.g. using the right tenses, collocation, and prepositions) but face problems in writing coherently and re-structuring ideas after evaluating them. The last finding was that the students did editing in developing the paragraph. The purpose of editing process is to check whether the paragraphs already contain good grammar, sentence structure, etc.

The next findings are related to the problems experienced by the students in writing the paragraph. From the data taken from the interview, the researcher found that there were some problems occurred.

English Words And Word Choice

Students were unable to express some ideas because they did not know the equiv-

alent words in English. Moreover, they were difficult to find appropriate words to express their idea. They stated that it was because of limited vocabulary.

“It is always hard for me to express my idea in English. I need to always look up a dictionary to find correct words” (P1.5).

“My supervisor often gives me feedback about correct word choice in my writing” (P2.3).

“It is easier to write in Bahasa Indonesia than English. In writing a paragraph I have difficulties to express ideas in English” (P5.3).

The finding is in line with other studies (Afrin, 2016; Haider, 2012; Rabab’ah, 2003) which found that the students are unable to express the ideas appropriately in their writings due to their limited vocabulary. They cannot find appropriate and necessary vocabulary to express the ideas. Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal (2016) also stated that sufficient vocabulary is essential and enable learners to produce language, particularly in writing. In EFL context, vocabulary is essential, especially in academic writing as the students need to express their ideas not in their native language.

Grammar

Specifically, the problems related to grammar were about sentence structure (syntax), tenses, morphology, and punctuation. Four students mentioned problems of incorrect grammar, poor sentence structure, and also a lot of punctuation mistakes. They occurred because of poor grammar knowledge. Most of them stated that they did not have good grammar knowledge.

“Grammar is so complicated. I make a lot of mistakes” (P3.3).

“From the feedback that I get I know that I have problem with tense and punctuation” (P4.3).

“Beside vocabulary, grammar is my other weakness. No wonder if I still have problems related to grammar” (P1.6).

“My supervisor said that I must improve my grammar knowledge as there are many grammatical mistakes in my undergraduate thesis during the supervision” (P5.4).

Grammar still becomes one of the main problems in academic writing (Connell, 2000; Thananart, 2000). Ideas will not be effectively conveyed through writing if it contains a lot of grammatical mistakes. The finding is in line with the study by Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal(2016) which found that grammar is one of the main problems in writing. They suggested that the writers should equip themselves good grammar knowledge to write academic texts.

Development Of The Main Idea

It was very often for the students that they were stuck in writing if they had no idea on how to develop the paragraph. Three students uncovered that they found it difficult to develop the main idea. The cause was they did not read much. In addition, they said that they were not creative enough to develop the idea.

“The hardest part in writing a paragraph was to start writing. I started writing my first paragraph after I thought for a long time” (P2.6).

“Writing needs creativity and critical think-

ing which I am not really good at” (P4.5).

“I made many pauses in writing the paragraph. I was stuck on the development of the idea” (P3.4).

Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal (2016) suggested that brainstorming and planning help writers to develop and manage the ideas for the paragraph. In pre-writing, brainstorming is beneficial to stimulate writers to list any ideas in their mind. Planning, then, is used by the writers to select and manage the ideas to be developed into a paragraph.

Coherence And Cohesiveness

Students knew that coherence and cohesiveness were important in a paragraph. However, three students stated that coherence and cohesiveness were still difficult to achieve. It was probably because they did not do brainstorming and planning. They directly did drafting. It made them difficult to control the supporting sentences and they focused only in supporting the main ideas. Moreover, it also made the connection among paragraphs insufficient.

“To make a good paragraph is not easy. My supervisor suggested me to check whether each sentence is correlated and each paragraph has correlation. That is my weakness” (P2.5).

“It is relatively new for me that I need to make paragraph cohesive and coherent beside the grammar” (P3.5).

“It is somehow hard for me to make good sentences which contribute to the main idea” (P5.7).

Pineteh's (2013) study also found that coherence and cohesion are problems in academic writing. Too often for the writers to have more than one main idea in a paragraph or the paragraph is not sufficiently developed through its supporting details. Coherence is important to bind the main idea to its supporting details (Ahmed, 2010). Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal (2016) suggested that writers can improve the coherence and cohesiveness through planning and systematic paragraph. Moreover, the writers should make use cohesive devices to connect the paragraphs. Furthermore, Bakalis (2003) suggested that writers should consider the connection among paragraph in a text to get the paragraph cohesion.

Ineffective Sentence

Two students stated a problem about ineffective sentence. Ineffective sentence made one paragraph have more than one main idea. Moreover, it also made the students write too many irrelevant sentences in a paragraph. It was because they directly wrote what they were thinking while writing the sentences. They did not plan and have systematic steps or outline of the sentences within a paragraph.

"As I directly wrote my paragraph in my laptop, too often I forget to ensure that the sentences I wrote were effective" (P1.7)

"I wrote too many things. Some of them were useless because they were not relevant" (P5.6).

Ineffective sentences result in redundancy. Boardman and Frydenberg (2002) suggested that the sentences should be effective to achieve coherence. The sentences should not be too many but should be sufficient to support the main idea.

Citation

As it was an academic writing, citation was one of features in the paragraph writing. Two students found it difficult to do proper citation from the theories. It was because they did not really know about how to do the right citation. Furthermore, they did not know well about the current academic writing format i.e. American Psychology Association (APA) format.

"APA is the format of my undergraduate thesis. It is another thing that we should learn and I am not good at it" (P.4.4).

"I thought I only need to write my undergraduate thesis like another paper. In fact I should consider the format, i.e. APA, and it is difficult" (P5.5).

Al-Khasawneh (2010) suggested that students can learn how to make academic writing through courses which equip them with the ability to do proper writing and also citation. It can be done by joining pre-requisite class such as educational research which prepare them to conduct research and make academic writing.

Based on the findings, the problems faced by students in writing paragraphs are related to words, word choice, grammar, development of main idea, coherence, cohesiveness, effective sentence, and citation. The problems of word and word choice, grammar, and the development of main idea are similar to Hailemariam's study (2011) as it found that some of L2 writers' problems in writing were vocabulary selections, generating idea, and appro

priate grammar usage. It is also in line with other studies (Abdulkareem, 2013; Ahmed, 2010) which found that vocabulary and idea development are problems in academic writing. The other problems were problems related to coherence, cohesiveness, and effective sentence. Boardman and Frydenberg (2002) stated that coherence and cohesiveness are useful to bind the supporting sentences to explain the main ideas as well as to connect one paragraph to other paragraphs. One of the ways to achieve them is by using effective sentences containing conjunctions, cohesive devices and transitional markers. The last problem was related to citation. Citation is very important in academic writing as it supports findings or statements with theories. When the students faced problem related to citation, it was caused by lack of knowledge to make a good citation.

CONCLUSION

The current research is limited to identify how the students develop paragraphs and what difficulties experienced by the students in writing paragraph of academic text. The findings showed that in developing paragraphs, the students did brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing. Among all four steps done by the students in developing paragraph, drafting and editing were the most frequent steps done by the students as all of them directly wrote the paragraph and edited the content of the paragraph whereas two of them included brainstorming and revising. Dealing with the problems in paragraph writing, the students faced difficulties in English words and word choice, grammar, development of main idea, coherence and cohesiveness, effective sentence, and citation.

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