

# Investigating Errors Committed by Saudi EFL University Students in Paragraph Writing: A case study of College of Science & Arts, Tanumah, King Khalid University

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**Abstract:** This study aims at investigating errors in paragraph writing committed by Saudi EFL university students of College of Science & Arts in Tanumah at King Khalid University in the academic year 2017/2018 during the second semester. For this purpose, research questions are posed and the answers to these questions are provided and discussed.. The population of this study includes all fourth level students besides EFL university instructors in the above-mentioned college. The analytical descriptive approach is adopted by the researcher. The study focuses on the errors in organizational structure and formatting elements of Saudi EFL university students' written paragraph .Testing, structured interview and personal observation of the researcher are all used as tools for collecting data. The findings of the study reveal that the students have weakness in paragraph writing due to some factors such as: EFL learners' lack of the adequate stock of vocabulary which results from insufficient English language proficiency besides EFL university learners' lack of motivation. Moreover, there are insufficient activities and practice of basic techniques of writing in addition to the lack of follow-up to writing performance of EFL learners. Finally, the recommendations and pedagogical implications are provided.

**Keywords:** EFL university learners, paragraph writing, organizational structure and formatting elements.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning English as a second or foreign language is not an easy task. Acquiring English is a difficult issue among second or foreign language learners. According to Brown (2000), in order to master English language, learners have to be adequately exposed to all of the four basic skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. English Language teaching is currently focusing on the teaching and learning of the four language skills. Researches show that learners' writing performance poses specific challenges for English second language teaching and learning contexts across the globe; in particular, in higher education institutions ( Ivanic and Lea 2006; Lea 2004; Munro 2003; Lea and Street 1998; Gambell 1991). For Dana, A. and Ayda , B. (2013) teaching English in the Arab world is challenging. Many students are able to understand the language, but most of the students face the problem of communicating their ideas effectively. The problem is the lack of both the adequate stock of English vocabulary and creativity in writing. It is evident that writing is the biggest challenge for many students.

According to Shah et al (2017), in this globalised world of business and scholarship, writing skill in English has enormous importance for understanding disciplinary knowledge and for establishment in career (Hyland 2013). Most of the subject areas such as business, science, technology, law, arts, social science are written in English language following the convention of the writing skill in English. Therefore, expression of acquired knowledge in any subject is impossible

without good knowledge in writing skill in English. Similarly, establishment in career demands an effective writing skill in English of a job seeker. Starting from applying for a job, hunting the job, retention of the job and job related communication demand good writing skill in English. While writing skill in English has all these needs based benefits to offer, a learner needs to learn the skill in a formal instructional setting to develop mastery of the target language skill. Though a learner has strong need to learn the writing skill, developing mastery in the target language skill, in this respect writing skill in English, is not easy. A learner has to face different problems. The problems of all ESL/EFL learners in the way of developing writing skill in English are not the same.

According to Rama, D. (2017) , EFL university students think that writing is the hardest part particularly in learning English; moreover it requires not only having a lot of vocabularies but also considering the mechanisms of it. Regarding these mechanisms, the students are urged to apply some of them in writing, for example, grammar, punctuation, coherence, and unity. In accomplishing the essay, the students are demanded to find out the appropriate ideas. Not only that the students have to consider the unity as well as the coherence of their own essays. Therefore, they need to be more creative to get some sets of vocabulary, punctuation, sentence structure, and also transitions. The students also have to use the appropriate tenses that support their own essay.

Brant (1946) , cited in Jennifer, A. (2014) , states that standard of satisfaction among language educators on the written works of language learners are good grammatical structures, appropriate punctuation marks, verbs in their right tenses, pronouns in the right case and correct spelling of words. On the other hand, the skills on “handwriting, spelling, vocabulary, sentence construction, and paragraph writing” primarily contribute to the overall writing quality. These skills are seemingly considered as the “building blocks of proficient writing,” students who fail to develop these skills are at risk for writing difficulties (in Santangelo & Olinghouse (2009:16); Graham, Harris, & Fink, 2000; Graham, Harris, & Fink-Chorzempa, 2002). In addition to this, Jung stated that writing skill in the studies of a second or foreign language may be described as a mean of “measuring individual’s language proficiency”(p180).

#### **Statement of the problem:**

Based on the researcher’s own experience as an English language instructor in the College of Science & Arts, Tanumah, King Khalid University, the students majoring in English encounter many challenges in writing skill that require investigation. It has been noticed by the researcher that when the students attempt to write a paragraph on a certain topic they produce badly constructed, badly presented, badly punctuated and incoherent piece of writing. Due to these problems, the researcher will assess and analyze the errors in organizational structure and formatting elements of the students' written paragraph.

#### **Questions of the study:**

The problem can be dealt with in terms of the following questions:

1. What are the factors behind Saudi EFL university learners' weakness in paragraph writing?
2. What should be done to improve student writing ability?

#### **Hypotheses of the study:**

The following hypotheses have been put forth as key factors behind errors committed by Saudi EFL university students in paragraph writing

- 1- EFL university students' Lack of motivation
- 2- Lack of writing practice in and outside classroom
- 3- EFL university students do not get the suitable feedback.
- 4 - Some errors can be related to the teaching methods and strategies.
- 5- EFL learners' writing errors and weak writing performance can be related to lack of the adequate stock of vocabulary.

#### **Objectives of the study:**

Based on the background discussed above, the main objectives of this study are the following:

- 1- To assess the organizational structure and formatting elements of EFL university students' written paragraph.
- 2- To identify and analyze errors in the organizational structure and formatting elements of EFL university students' written paragraph.
- 3- To determine the causes of these errors.
- 4- To suggest some remedial recommendations on the basis of findings and suitable solutions for these errors

### **Significance of the Study:**

It is hoped that the results of this study would increase the students' knowledge about the sources of errors and how to improve their writing performance. It is also hoped that the findings of the study would provide a means by which the EFL teacher can assess the learning and teaching process and determine priorities for future plan.

### **Limits of the study:**

The study is devoted to assess, analyze and identify errors in the organizational structure and formatting elements of the written paragraph of Saudi EFL university students of Level Four in the College of Science & Arts, Tanumah, King Khalid University, in the academic year 2017/2018 during the second semester. Testing, structured interviews and personal observation of the researcher are all used as tools for collecting data.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Definition of writing skills in the EFL classroom:**

According to Joana, C. A. (2013), writing is defined by Dyson and Freedman (1991:58) as "a process-oriented, goal-directed and problem-solving process, which involves the writer's awareness of the composing process and the teacher's or peer's intervention at any time needed". On the other hand, Susser (1994:39) defines writing as "a recursive, non-linear cognitive process in which the writer moves back and forth between prewriting-idea generating, writing, revising and editing until he/she is satisfied with his/her creation" and according to Flower (1994), writing is regarded as a socially situated and communicative act.

Nunan, D. (2003), cited in Afrin (2016), believes that writing is both a physical and mental act. At the most basic level, writing is the physical act of committing words or ideas to some medium. On the other hand, writing is the mental work of inventing ideas, thinking about how to express them, and organizing them into statements and paragraphs that will be clear to a reader.

For Byrne (1996), cited in Eltayeb, F. (2016:190) 'writing' involves encoding of a message written through a sequence of sentences ordered together in certain ways, and it requires some conscious mental effort including making notes, drafting, and revising. Based on the above definition, the present study defines 'writing' as a thinking process which involves generating ideas, composing these ideas in sentences and paragraphs, and finally revising the ideas and paragraphs composed.

### **2.2 Importance of writing:**

Writing is an essential skill in our everyday lives and that makes it really an important aspect of foreign language teaching. Writing skill is important because it is a good way to reinforce what students have learned and enrich them with new vocabulary in written form. Sawsan, S. (2011) points out that Al-Mutawa & Kailani (1989:129) have stated that learning and training to write gradually and systematically is a process which begins with simple copying and ends with free expression. It must be under the guidance of the teacher through several stages of writing experience.

In the field of EFL or ESL instruction, Anchalee and Pongrat (2008.), cited in Eltayeb, F. (2016:191), explain the importance of writing by claiming that writing helps students learn. First, writing reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary that were taught to students. Second, when students write, they also have a chance to be adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have just learned to say and to take risks. Third, when they write, they necessarily become involved with the new language; the effort to express ideas and constant use of eyes, hand, and brain is a unique way to reinforce learning. As students struggle with what to put down next or how to put it down on paper, they often discover something new to write or a new way of expressing their ideas. Raimes (1983:6) points out

that the close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing a valuable part of any language course. She identified the different components for producing a clear, fluent and effective piece of writing: content, the writer's process, audience, purpose, word choice, organization, mechanics, grammar and style.

According to Muhammad, F. et. al (2016), writing is the most challenging area in learning second language. It is based on appropriate and strategic use of language with structural accuracy and communicative potential (Dar & Khan, 2015; Hyland, 2003; Mahboob, 2014). Kellogg (2001) opines that writing is a cognitive process that tests memory, thinking ability and verbal command to successfully express the ideas; because proficient composition of a text indicates successful learning of a second language. Therefore, learning how to write has gained considerable importance for the last two decades due to two factors: its use as a tool for effective communication of ideas, and the extensive research work carried out in this area to examine various issues faced by L2 writers (Dar & Khan, 2015; and Hyland, 2003).

### 2.3 Paragraph:

Paragraph writing remains one of the most important parts of writing. The paragraph serves as a container for each of the ideas of an essay or other piece of writing. Paragraphs are versatile and can take many forms that strengthen writing, provide variety for readers, and help reader to organize the ideas he/she presents. For Langan (2001), cited in Sawsan, S. (2011), "a paragraph is a short paper of around 150-200 words. It usually consists of an opening point called a topic sentence followed by a series of sentences which support that point.

According to Sawsan Saud Aziz (2011:374), Al-Hamash & Younis (1985) state that "a paragraph is a group of sentences concerned with one idea. OWL (2009), as cited in Ali (2010:454), clarifies a paragraph as "a group of closely related sentences which deal with and develop one idea."

A paragraph is also defined by Hornby (1974: 607), cited in Hussein, M. (2009), as a group of several sentences dealing with one main idea.

Alice, S and Masoud, S (2007: 1) define paragraph as a group of sentences about a topic. That is, a paragraph is a group of related sentences that discuss one (and usually only one) main idea.

This part can be summarized by saying that a paragraph is a group of sentences that convey an idea. Each sentence works together as part of a unit to create an overall thought or impression. A paragraph is the smallest unit or cluster of sentences in which one idea can be developed adequately. Paragraphs can stand alone or function as part of an essay, but each paragraph covers only one main idea.

### 2.4 Paragraph Organization:

According to Alice, S and Masoud, S (2007: 5), a typical paragraph must have three parts as follows:

#### 2.4.1 The topic sentence:

It is a sentence that introduces the topic and tells what the writer will say about the topic. The topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph. Every good paragraph has a topic sentence, which clearly states the topic and the controlling idea of the paragraph.

A topic sentence is the most important sentence in a paragraph. It briefly indicates what the paragraph is going to discuss. For this reason, the topic sentence is a helpful guide to both the writer and the reader. The writer can see what information to include (and what information to exclude). The reader can see what the paragraph is going to be about and is therefore better prepared to understand it..

According to Hornby (1974: 607), cited in Hussein, M. (2009) the topic sentence tells what the paragraph is about and the writer's attitude or idea about the topic, i.e., the controlling idea.

Here are three important points to remember about a topic sentence.

1. A topic sentence is a complete sentence; that is, it contains at least one subject and one verb.
2. A topic sentence contains both a topic and a controlling idea. It names the topic and then limits the topic to a specific area to be discussed completely in the space of a single paragraph.

3. A topic sentence is the most general statement in the paragraph because a topic sentence is the first sentence of the body paragraph. Simply it introduces the topic of the paragraph. A good topic sentence will be broad enough to allow for explication but narrow enough that it does not require a paragraph that is too long.

A topic sentence gives the main idea of a paragraph. It usually occurs as the first or last sentence of the paragraph. Some paragraphs will not have a topic sentence, if the main point is obvious. Others might place the topic sentence slightly differently.

#### 2.4.2 The supporting sentences:

The supporting sentences of a paragraph are the sentences between the topic sentence and the concluding sentence. They “support” the topic sentence. That is, they explain and elaborate the point of the paragraph. There are several kinds of specific supporting details: examples, statistics, and quotations.

For Hornby (1974: 607) in Hussein, M. (2009), the supporting detail in a paragraph explains or develops the topic sentence. The supporting part can be narratives, details, facts, examples, explanation or statistics. One of the biggest problems in student writing is that student writers often fail to support their ideas adequately. They need to use specific details to be thorough and convincing.

#### 2.4.3 The concluding sentence:

It is the sentence that often repeats the information in the topic sentence in a different way and concludes the topic of the paragraph. The concluding sentence signals the end of the paragraph and leaves the reader with important points to remember. Concluding sentences are customary for stand-alone paragraphs. The concluding sentence serves two purposes:

1. It signals the end of the paragraph.
2. It leaves the reader with the most important ideas to remember. It can do this in two ways:
  - By summarizing the main points of the paragraph OR
  - By repeating the topic sentence in different words.

#### 2.5 The elements of formatting a paragraph:

Allice, S and Masoud, S (2007: 3) mention that formatting a paragraph is based on the following elements :

**1- Margins:** a paragraph must have a margin on the right and a margin on the left. This means that the paragraph begins 1 inch or 1 ¼ inches from the edge of the paper.

**2- Spacing:** A paragraph should be double-spaced.

**3-Indenting:** The first sentence of a paragraph must be indented. This means that it begins five spaces from the left margin.

**4-Connected sentences:** the sentence in a paragraph should follow each other. It is not a paragraph if every sentence begins on a new line. A well-supported paragraph has at least 5 sentences and often more.

**5-Title:** A paragraph by itself has a title. This is one word or a group of words that tells what the topic is.

#### 2.6 EFL Writing Difficulty:

Ahmad, et. al., (2013) , cited in Muhammad , F. et. al (2016) think that poor writing skills originate from two factors: the teacher and the learner. Teachers lack appropriate pedagogic approach to teach writing, including providing prompt and effective feedback to students, and most crucially, teachers' lack of ability to motivate students. On the other hand, students face numerous challenges: effects of L1 transfer lack of reading, motivation, and practice.

Eltayeb,F. (2016:192) thinks that in order to comprehend second language writing difficulty more clearly, a number of researchers as well as scholars have paid much attention to identifying what difficulties EFL/ESL student writers may confront while writing. Al-Khsawneh (2010), for example, relates the weakness of EFL students in writing performance to the following factors:

- (a) Lack of motivation, or the teacher's interest.
- (b) Many learners use their mother tongue because of the isolated culture. (c) Methods of teaching English included the medium of instructions, using Arabic in English classes.
- (d) Teachers' low proficiency in English.
- (e) Lack of writing practice in educational institutions.
- (f) EFL students have limited vocabulary. Therefore, students end up repeating the same words; this hinders creativity. Students could not give voice to their thoughts because they lack the adequate stock of vocabulary.
- (g) English language learners do not use invented spelling and their written texts are restricted to words which they know.
- (h) The present tense is the only tense used in their writing.
- (i) It is difficult to understand writing performance of the EFL learners because of the ill-structured sentences in composition.
- (j) Students are unwilling to share their work with other students and they do not get the suitable feedback.

Ski (2005), cited in Thongma (2012:6), attributes weak performance of EFL learners in English language learning in general and writing skill in particular to the following factors:

- (a) EFL learners have insufficient or lacking of exposure to the language as there is a limited opportunity to use English outside the classrooms.
- (b) Learners lack motivation to learn English as they do not see the immediate need to use the language.

In general, Weir (1988), cited in Haifa, A. (2016), concludes that, the students' writing shows the following characteristic defects:

- a) High frequency of grammatical errors
- b) Lack of variety in grammatical structures employed
- c) Use of inappropriate vocabulary
- d) Use of inappropriate grammatical structures
- e) Limited range of vocabulary
- f) Poor spelling
- g) Inadequate understanding of the topic
- h) Deficiency in clear self-expression
- j) Poor punctuation
- k) Poor handwriting
- l) Untidiness

### **2.7 Teaching Writing:**

Eltayeb, F. (2016:191) thinks that teaching writing is a very important part of teaching English language and no doubt it needs special attention. Though not easy, it is not so difficult as many teachers and students imagine. Watkins, P. (2004), analyses the pros and cons of teaching writing and lists the essential reasons why learners may need to learn how to write:

1. Writing is an important means of communication, and therefore an important skill to master.
2. Writing can consolidate other language learning aspects (vocabulary, grammar).
3. Writing is a relatively straightforward way of practicing and using language outside the classroom.
4. A writing phase in a lesson can provide a change of pace.
5. Learning to write may fulfill professional needs. Learners may have to write business letters, emails or reports in English.
6. Many exams demand writing skills.

Hedge (1999) assumes that writing is essentially a creative process which involves students in a learning process, motivates, builds their confidence, and gives them an opportunity to explore the language, to communicate and to look for the best ways of self-expression. The teacher's role in this process is undoubtedly very important: The teacher's role is to provide an environment in which students will learn about writing, see models of good writing, get plenty of practice in writing, and receive help during the writing process. The teacher, being a facilitator, helper, motivator, consultant, prompter, advisor and only then assessor, should help learners by organizing writing as a series of stages. First of all, students need to feel the necessity of writing. « Why should I write? What's the point of writing? » - these are common complaints of learners. And it is up to the teacher to bring real- world atmosphere in the classroom. Nowadays, it is not difficult to do, due to travel experiences, student exchange programs, internet opportunities and so on.

Ur (2002) assures that the writing process is the starting point for developing students' writing abilities, teachers must recognize that students need a range of writing experiences to develop as writers: "You learn to write through writing. ... One of our main tasks then, as teachers, is to get our students to write a lot, thinking, as they do so and learning from their own writing experience." (Ur 2002, p.169). In addition, in order to become good at writing, learners need concentration, instruction, practice, and patience. The teacher's task is to assist learners to gain control over the written word. How to do this? Douglas Brown (2001: pp. 346-355) provides guidelines for developing learners' writing techniques.

The teacher, when giving the learners a writing task, should always consider various techniques for maintaining efficient writing practice. These include: balance process and product, take account of the learners' cultural/literary background, connect reading and writing, provide as much authentic writing as possible, frame lesson plans in terms of including prewriting, drafting, and revising stages, offer techniques that are as interactive as possible and sensitively apply methods of responding to, and correcting the learners' writing. Furthermore, the teacher should bear in mind what good writers do and encourage the learners to do the same: focus on a goal or main idea when writing, perceptively gauge their audience, spend some time planning to write, easily let their first ideas flow onto the paper, follow a general organizational plan as they write, solicit and utilize feedback on their writing, revise their work willingly and efficiently and patiently make as many revisions as needed.

According to Brookes, A. and Grundy, P. (1998:15-17) when the focus is on the writing process, four main points have to be taken into account:

### **I. Determining a purpose:**

The purposes of writing outside the classroom and in the classroom may be different. For example, outside the classroom we may write because we feel the necessity to make our views known to someone else, while in the classroom there may be other purposes, such as to develop language skills or to fulfill institutional requirements.

### **II. Selecting the main ideas:**

The following activities may help in gathering and selecting ideas:

- a) Brainstorming;
- b) Discussing ideas with colleagues;
- c) Taking stock of what we have written at regular intervals as we write and considering what we might go on to write about.

### **III. Identifying readership:**

Taking notes on readership is another important part of writing process. Learners have to know to whom they are writing, who will read their work. This gives them additional encouragement and interest.

### **IV. Suitable form:**

It becomes much easier if we distinguish what is conventional from what writers are free to choose for themselves. The beginnings and endings of letters, for example, are conventional. We might provide a variety of different examples from which our learners could select the most appropriate for their purpose.

## 2.8 Teacher's Role:

For Shouman (2002), cited in Ranganath and Rini (2015), the teacher's role is to persuade the students to think how best to convey what he or she wants to say and to feel responsible. Encouragement gives students the feeling that they could be trusted for what they put on papers. Also encouragement gives students the confidence that they can learn to monitor and self-correct own errors to improve their overall accuracy. Teachers feel unsure of themselves when confronted with giving suggestion on students' writing (Digest, 1996, p.3). This supports the idea that teachers who do not get enough practice for writing approaches will not be able to give any advice to students to improve the styles of writing. Pinsent (1992:99) believes that we "Encourage students to write and look at what they produce." This will help students to talk about what they have written since speaking precedes writing.

The role of the teacher is to encourage the students' work and let them keep on writing, no matter how the output is. "What the student needs is to be able to write correctly so that he or she is not afraid to put words on paper because of apprehension that the text may be couched in non-literary language," (Neville, 1988, p.43). The teachers should backup students for whatever is presented. But this does not always work when students present unacceptable English. What teachers can do is to politely not accept the work with some comments on the weakness. They should not express 100% total dissatisfaction but, in an indirect way, point to the problems to be prevented in the future so that no hard feelings toward students expressed, making them depressed. A knowledgeable teacher always finds ways to keep the students eager to write by providing topics of interest and yet related to the school curriculum. "Topics to be given to the students to write about are pre-selected by the teacher and should have some relationship to their English curriculum. Students will be able to write more, and more effectively, on topics that relate to their linguistic and social background and are within their semantic repertoire," (Smadi, 1986, p.35). Teachers need to allow students to take a different role each time composing a written form. The role that is practiced by students will give them a chance of creativity and countless more ideas for writing (Runkle, 1988, p.55).

Graham & Perin (2007), cited in Muhammad, F. et al (2016), think that students' writing ability can be improved by fostering their interest, motivation and enjoyment for writing, through technology. Moreover, Kellogg & Raulerson (2007) in Muhammad, F. et al (2016), believe that it will be convenient for language and content teachers to monitor their students from broad perspectives. Most importantly, it is necessary that attitudes towards writing and dealing with its issues are changed. Teachers must employ strategies to elicit ideas from students to be penned down on a piece of paper to promote their verbal ability. Moreover, instant and critical feedback needs to be given on their output, so that their confidence is elevated.

Hyland (2002:78) sums up the role of teacher by saying that fundamentally, writing is learned, rather than taught ... the teacher's best methods are flexibility and support".

## 2.9 A Brief Review on Previous Relevant Studies:

This part provides a thorough review of the genuine contributions of some previous studies and views in the domain of errors made by EFL learners in paragraph writing.

According to Hajar, S. (2015), several scholars, who studied the errors in paragraph writing committed by groups of foreign and second language learners learning English as second and foreign language, have reported interesting findings. Zhang et al (1995) compared the writing performance of 138 non-English majors and 62 English majors of a Chinese university via a multiple choice test and an essay writing test. The results showed that the non-English majors did much better in the multiple choice task than in the writing task while the English majors did better the other way around, and that the non-English majors made far more errors in the writing task than the English majors did. In addition, they found that, for both English majors and non-English majors, rhetorical problems in their writing were much worse than grammatical problems (as cited in Liu and Wang, 2011).

Afrin (2016) employed questionnaire of eleven close ended questions to collect data about writing problems from 89 undergraduate learners studying at a private university in Bangladesh. The study found that 88% of the learners do not have sufficient command over sentence structure in English, followed by lack of confidence to express ideas by 74% learners and use of no prewriting technique by 63% learners and no concern about organization by 66% learners.

Olsen (1999) carried out research in English written by Norwegian EFL learners in which language problems on different linguistic levels were analyzed and the theory of compensatory strategies was used. The results showed that less proficient learners had a higher number of grammatical, orthographic and syntactic errors, which can be attributed to cross-linguistic influence.



Tananart (2000) examined errors in comparison and contrast paragraphs written by EFL university students at Chulalongkorn University. The vast majority of errors were grammatical structure (73.86%), and the other types of errors were errors in using transition signals (10.01%), verb forms (7.68%), word choice (6.90%) and spelling (1.55%).

Al-Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) made a comparative study of the writing problems of the learners studying at schools and universities. Among the five writing problems sorted out in the study, both the groups of learners mentioned maintaining cohesion and writing correct sentence as the fourth and fifth problems. Among the other problems, though different in chronological order between school and university learners, how to start a paragraph or essay, vocabulary and development of idea or content are mentioned as the problems.

Connell (2000) analyzed different kinds of errors that Japanese students made on tests which required full, written sentences to get the results for constructing a suitable syllabus. Each error was analyzed on how it affected the understanding of the sentence in which it was used. The results showed that the use of subject in a sentence, the parts of speech and general word order created more problems than other grammatical aspects (p. 95-103).

In her investigation, Sanjila, Y. P (2005) cited in Jennifer, A. (2014) conducted a study on the students of Morogoro Secondary Schools in Tanzania to explore the six glaring writing problems such as capitalization and punctuation problems, inexplicitness or fuzziness, poor organization or illogical sequence, spelling problems and grammatical errors.

Shah, M. S. et al (2017) report the findings about paragraph writing challenges of the Bangladeshi tertiary level EFL learners. Data were collected through questionnaire distributed to 43 learners majoring in English Language and Literature in International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh. Findings from the questionnaires revealed that Bangladeshi EFL learners have problems in all the three stages of writing English paragraphs. Writing stage is the most difficult stage followed by revising and planning stages of writing paragraphs. Among all the sub stages of writing paragraphs, using idioms tops the list of the writing challenges followed by using appropriate vocabulary and using antonym. Brainstorming appears as the least difficult sub stage for the learners. Among the three types of paragraphs, writing comparison and contrast paragraph is the most difficult followed by writing cause and effect paragraph and writing listing paragraph. The implications are provided following the needs of the learners.

Ali, A. K. et. al (2013) examine types of errors of paragraph writing of Iranian learners of English at under-graduate level in Bushehr University of Medical Sciences and Health Services. The data for this study were 90 first year medical students at under-graduate level in Bushehr University of Medical Sciences and Health Services as foreign language learners participated in this research. The outcome of the study shows that the total number of errors committed by the learners was 290. Based on the classification, it was found that the total number of errors committed by the students was 209 in pre-test of the paragraph writing and in the post-test of the paragraph writing was 81. The result of the study showed a significant difference between pre-test and post-test in paragraph writing of Iranian EFL students. The result also showed that Iranian EFL students were not aware of rules of paragraph writing of English.

Pimpisa, R. N (2015) attempts to explore the major sources of errors occurred in the writing of EFL students and also to investigate the types of errors and the linguistic level that presents the most errors in their writing. Forty narrative essays composed by Thai university students were collected and analysed. Results showed that the mostly frequent types of errors were translated words from Thai, word choice, verb tense, preposition, and comma. The errors derived from two sources: interlingual and intralingual. Interlingual or native language interference was found to be the dominant source of errors. This study provides pedagogical implications for EFL instructors. Instructors should pay attention to the influence of learners' native language.

In reviewing some studies conducted on writing errors committed by Arab EFL learners, many studies show that Arab EFL students face severe problems in writing while learning English process. Abi samra (2003), for example, states that most of the syntactic errors committed by Arab EFL learners in their written production are because of the interference of their first language. She has emphasized that when the EFL learners do not know how to express something in the foreign language, they directly refer to their native language.

Hamid (2006) in Eltayeb, F(2016: 193) investigates spelling errors found in written composition of second and third secondary students in the United Arab Emirates. The investigation shows that the students' spelling errors resulted from lack of motivation, insufficient teaching and insufficient practice.

Similarly, Al-Buainain (2007), cited in Valaei, E.B (2015), examined 40 exam scripts of the first writing course to identify the problems Arab students faced in English writing at Qatar University. She identified and then classified the committed errors mainly by focusing on some syntactic features such as verbs, relative clauses, articles, fragments, noun modifiers, and prepositions. She finally reached the conclusion that some of the errors are due to the negative interference of L1 habits and some of the errors were caused due to students' lack of sufficient knowledge in English.

According to Mohammed, N & Israt, S (2018), Ruwaida (2015) investigated problems that Palestinian Arab EFL students faced in developing well-written paragraphs in English. The findings showed that students faced many problems particularly in three areas of writing English composition: sentence structure, paragraph structure, content and organization. She further diagnosed the cause of problems as the transfer of the writing style of their first language (L1 transfer)

Concerning the writing errors committed by Saudi EFL learners, Khan (2011), cited in Choudhary and Umer (2012:18), conducted a study to investigate the problems of Saudi university undergraduates, has mentioned that they face several problems in phoneme clusters, spellings, grammar, mistakes due to first language interference, structure, doubling of subjects, doubling of preposition, tenses, articles, appropriate vocabulary, wrong use of prefixes & suffixes etc.

Khan (2011:125) also reviewed several studies in this regard and concluded that Arab EFL learners' problems are caused by the following reasons:

- a) school graduates have lack of information regarding the university or college they enrolled in;
- b) there is deficiency in the English language curricula offered by some schools and universities;
- c) dreadful teaching methodology;
- d) problems with proper language environments; and
- e) lack of personal impetus on the part of the students.

According to Khan's (2011:125) findings, the causes of the problems may be dealt with from four perspectives, i.e., the learners, faculty members, curricula and the environment of teaching /learning context. It has been reported that Saudi EFL learners are more interested in getting better scores instead of learning the target language and they are in the habit of memorizing passages without understanding, grammatical rules and lexical items to achieve high grade point average (Grami, 2010; Zaid, 1993). Another very strong reason behind this marks-oriented behaviour of Saudi EFL learners is that a vast majority of them lack intrinsic motivation and bear various extrinsic motivational factors to learn English language (Javid, Asmari, & Farooq, 2012). Concerning the role of EFL teachers, a growing mass of research has suggested that a vast majority of EFL teachers seem to lack the following:

- a) a proper and appropriate training to teach English,
- b) a proper motivation to indulge in teaching process, and
- c) willingness to incorporate innovation and modern techniques in their teaching practices; thus, causing the continuation of traditional, outdated and teacher-led teaching practices that is a major impediment in the way of effective and efficient ELT in Saudi Arabia (Bersamina, 2009; Grami, 2010; Zaid, 1993). Another important factor in this regard is the absence of appropriate and learner-centered curricula to cater for the specific EFL needs of the learners. It has been frequently reported that the curricula taught in several Saudi university is outdated, traditional and textbook-based that encourage the students to merely memorise instead of making them grasp the target language (Khan, 2011; Bersamina, 2009; Zughoul, 1987).

Al-Hazmi and Scholfield (2007) conducted a study on Saudi University students. They enforced used of checklist and peer feedback in EFL writing to determine the difficulties of their samples experienced in ESL writing. In their study, Al-Hazmi and Scholfield found out that basic English language problems as well as discourse organization, paragraphing and cohesion are the main problems of EFL learners.

In a similar Saudi context, Alhaisoni (2012) examined written samples of 100 first-year female Arabic-speaking EFL students of the University of Ha'il. The findings showed that students made a considerable number of errors in their use of articles.

Sawalmeh (2013), cited in Valaei, E.B. (2015), examined 32 essays of Saudi students to investigate the errors the students had committed. The results showed that the Arab students committed 10 common errors: verb tense, word, order, singular/plural form, subject-verb agreement, double negative, spelling, capitalization, articles, sentence fragments and prepositions. The researcher studied the types, frequency, and percentage of students' errors. After examining students' errors, it was concluded that most of the students' errors were due to the influence of L1.

Ibrahim and Fadi (2013) tried to find out the reasons behind the weakness of writing in English in pre-year students at Taibah University in Saudi Arabia. The findings revealed that grammatical weakness, lack of knowledge and understanding, less practice and educational background were the main reasons of writing errors.

Similarly, in Saudi context, a study by Zuhour and Fatima (2015) conducted at Tabuk University explored the common types of errors among 40 female students in the Department of English & Translation. The findings of the study showed that most language problems were of grammatical problems (in the field of tenses, prepositions, syntactic, subject-verb agreement and the use of articles), punctuation problems (at the level of the absence, the misuse or the addition of punctuation marks) and spelling problems (in the field of substitution, omission, addition, disordering, segmentation and unrecognizable words). As the sample size was small, and difficulty level of writing task is not known, the findings cannot be taken as granted and generalized.

In their study, Taj, M & Zoheb, (2016) investigate issues usually faced by EFL learners in writing skills. Fifty students of Preparatory Year Program (from different sections) Najran University were randomly selected to illicit their opinion on writing skill using Likert's 5 scale (always, usually, sometimes, rarely never) questionnaire. In addition, fifty writing samples from first and second midterms of Preparatory Year Program were also selected. The study analyses the writing samples mainly focusing on with special reference to capitalization, punctuation, language use (grammar) and spelling and their impact on other items of language like articles, preposition, coherence, cohesion etc. Contrastive analysis of students' writing samples and questionnaire prove that students commit mistakes, though unconsciously, in writing. While conducting data analysis using students' writing samples, it was observed that students used ways to pass an exam i.e. memorize the writing answer(s)/paragraph(s) rather than the proper approaches to developing/learning most common writing strategies when writing an answer. In the end, this study offers some remedial measures for writing problems of Arab EFL learners.

Mohammed, N & Israt, S (2018) investigate the writing errors of ninety Saudi non-English major undergraduate students of different proficiency levels from three faculties, who studied English as a foundation course at the English Language Center in the College of Languages & Translation at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia in the academic year 2016-17. The findings reveal that the common errors the Saudi EFL students make in writing English paragraphs fall under four categories namely grammar, lexis, semantics and mechanics. Then it compares the categories, types and frequency of errors committed by these three groups of students. Among these categories, grammar has been observed as the most error-prone area where students commit errors the most. The study also posits that among the three groups, the students of the College of Medicine make the minimum errors in all the types and the highest number of errors is committed by the students of Engineering College. The College of Computer Science is in the second position in making errors. The frequency of error types is also found different among these three groups.

The above reviewed studies investigated EFL learners' writing errors in different contexts, using different tools for collecting data. They related writing errors to different factors such as L1 interference, lack of knowledge and understanding, less practice and educational background ..... etc. They also attributed writing errors to mechanical problem like lack of pre writing technique, problem of sentence structure, vocabulary problem, cohesion problem and the problem of content development.

The present study places itself as an extension of and in line with some of the previously reviewed studies conducted in the domain of writing errors of EFL students. The big difference between the previously -reviewed studies and the present study is that the present study focuses on analyzing and identifying the errors in the organizational structure and formatting elements of the written paragraph of Saudi EFL university students. The data of this paper were collected from the writing performance of EFL university fourth level students in English Language Department and from the answers of the structured interviews conducted on the English language teaching staff.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Method of Study:

The study adopts descriptive analytical approach.

#### 3.2 Population of Study:

The population includes all fourth level EFL university students who study writing skill course in the second semester in the academic year 2017/2018 in the Department of English Language in the College of Science and Arts, Tanumah. The students are 20-22 years old with Arabic as their mother tongue. All the subjects of the study are Saudi male college students. In addition to the students, the population also covers all English language teaching staff in the above mentioned college.

#### 3.3 Sample of Study:

- (i) 25 students' answer sheets from fourth level EFL students are randomly chosen from writing test as representative sample.
- (ii) All the answers of the structured interviews which are conducted on the English language teaching staff in the above mentioned college.

#### 3.4 Instruments:

The data of this study are collected through the following tools:

##### 3.4.1 The Test:

The test is designed for the students chosen as a sample population. In this test, the students are asked to write a paragraph on a certain topic.

##### 3.4.2 The Structured Interview:

This interview is conducted on EFL university teaching staff in which the interviewees are asked to give their opinions about weakness of writing performance of EFL university learners in terms of the major factors behind Saudi EFL university students' weakness in paragraph writing, what should be done by EFL instructor to improve EFL university students' writing ability and what should be done by EFL university students to develop their writing abilities.

### 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This part focuses on the analysis of students' written tasks and the structured interview conducted on EFL university teaching staff.

#### 4.1 Analysis of Students' Written Task:

As it has been mentioned before, the students' written tasks will be dealt with in term of the two following headings:

##### 4.1.1 Analysis and assessment of formatting elements of paragraph:

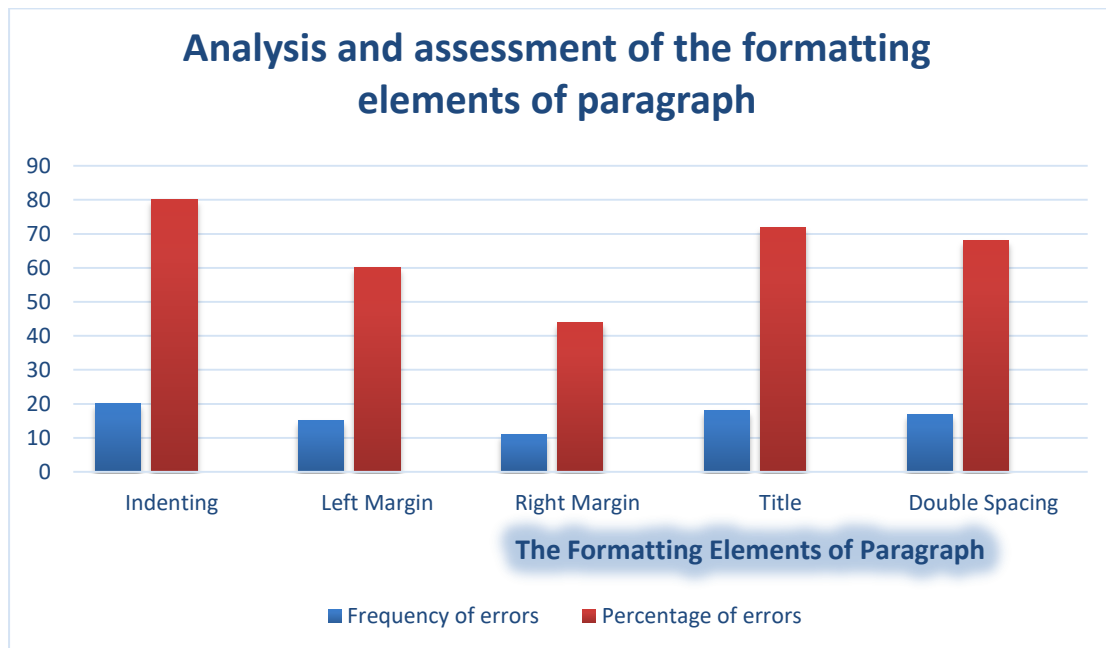
The formatting elements of paragraph that will be analyzed and assessed, in this study, include errors in indenting, left margin, right margin, title, connected sentences and double spacing.

**Table 4.1: Number and percentage of errors in the formatting elements of paragraph**

Elements	Frequency of errors	Percentage of errors
Indenting	20	80%
Left Margin	15	60%
Right Margin	11	44%
Title	18	72%
Connected sentences	23	92%
Double Spacing	17	68%

As shown in Table 4.1, *indenting* errors are one of the most frequently-committed error type (80 %). Other error types are errors in *titles* (72 %), errors in double spacing (68 %), errors in the *left margin* (60 %) and errors in *right margin* (44 %). Errors in connected sentences constitute 92%. This shows that errors in connected sentences are the most frequently occurred errors.

A deeper analysis of these errors revealed that the errors may be attributed to the EFL students' ignorance of English rules for formatting elements of paragraph. However, ignorance of such rules may be related to the teacher's ways of teaching and to the student's carelessness, lack of motivation and lack of practice.



**Chart 4.1: Percentage of errors in the formatting elements of paragraph**

With reference to the above- mentioned chart, it can be inferred that:

- 80 % of students committed errors in *indenting*
- 72 % of students committed errors in *title*
- 68 % students committed errors in double spacing
- 60 % of students committed errors in *left margin*
- 44% of students committed errors in right margin
- 92% of students committed errors in connected sentences.

On the basis of the analysis of writing performance of EFL learners, it can be concluded that EFL university learners don't know the basic formats for writing paragraph and this can be related to their lack of writing practice in and outside classroom besides that there is no close and continuous follow-up to the students' writing activities and there is no immediate feedback given to the students.

#### 4.1.2 Analysis and assessment of paragraph components:

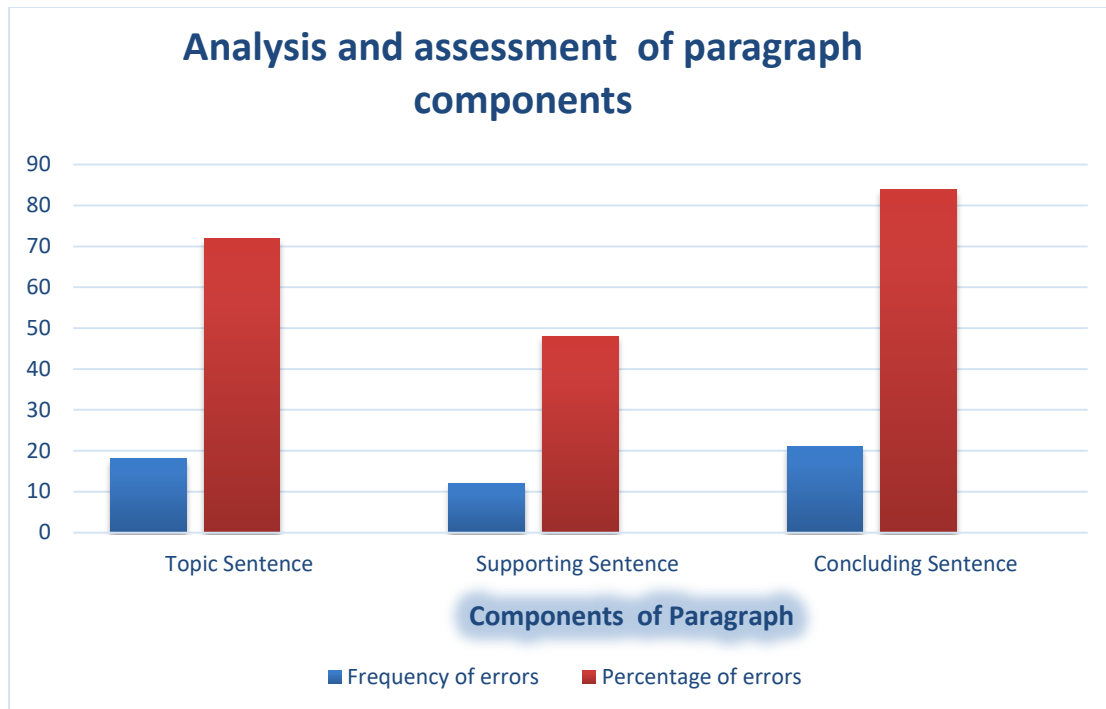
In this part, the analysis and assessment will focus on the errors in *topic sentence* , *supporting sentences and concluding sentence* .

**Table 4.2: Number and percentage of errors in the paragraph components**

Parts of paragraph	Frequency of errors	Percentage of errors
Topic Sentence	18	72%
Supporting Sentence	12	48%
Concluding Sentence	21	84%

According to the table 4.2, errors in the concluding sentence are the most frequently-made error type (84 %). Other error types include errors in the topic sentence (72 %) and errors in the supporting sentence (48 %).

A deeper look at the above-mentioned table will no doubt; reflect the difficulties which Saudi EFL university students face in the organizing of paragraph structures. A possible explanation for these errors could be related to the students' ignorance of the components of paragraph and to the rules of structuring paragraphs in terms of topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence. A probable explanation of these errors could be attributed to the ways of teaching and lack of follow-up to the students' writing activities.



**Chart 4.2: Percentage of errors in the paragraph components**

With reference to the above chart, it can be inferred that:

- 84 % of students did not write a concluding sentence.
- 72% of students did not write a topic sentence.
- 48 % of students did not use supporting sentences
- On the basis of the analysis of writing performance of EFL learners, it can be concluded that EFL university learners do not know how an English paragraph should be composed, organized, paragraphed and constructed. The students are very far from creating and supporting ideas about any given topic.

#### 4.2 Analysis and Findings of the Interview

According to analysis of the structured interview conducted on the EFL university instructors, the following points can be inferred:

(1) *Do you think that EFL university learners have weak academic writing performance?*

Majority of the university EFL instructors believe that Saudi EFL university learners have weak academic writing performance.

(2) *What do you think the major factors behind Saudi EFL university students' weakness in paragraph writing?*

Based on their experience, most of the interviewees think that the following are the major factors behind weakness in paragraph writing of Saudi EFL university students at College of Science and Arts in Tanumah:

(a) Lack of motivation

(b) Lack of the adequate stock of vocabulary which results from insufficient English language proficiency so they have difficulty in creating, supporting or organizing the ideas

(c) Inappropriate teaching methods and strategies.

(e) Lack of writing practice in and outside classroom

(f) EFL university students do not get the suitable feedback.

(3) *What do you think should be done by EFL instructor to improve EFL university students' writing ability?*

In order to improve EFL university students' writing ability, the EFL university teaching staff proposes the following suggestions:

- There should be ample practice for the elements of formatting a paragraph.
- Students should be given a lot of class-work as well as homework on different types of paragraph.
- Frequent use of modern teaching facilities.
- Using pair and group work strategies and using peer reviews.
- Timely correction of students' errors.
- Frequent dictionary usage.
- Teaching students how to form a meaningful sentence should be the first step. Then, paragraph writing should be taught. During this process students should be encouraged to read extensively to have some ideas about the writing topics.
- Teachers should help students increase their stock of vocabulary by providing them with reading materials.
- Teachers should give immediate feedback to students.
- Teachers should evaluate their methods of teaching writing skill.

(4) *What do you think should be done by EFL university students to develop their writing abilities?*

For EFL students to develop their writing abilities, the EFL university teaching staff proposes the following suggestions:

(i) EFL university students need to attain correctness and accuracy in grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, arrangement of sentence structures, linkage of information across sentences, capitalization, putting or omitting the comma, etc.

(ii) Students should read books of literature in the target language in order to enrich their vocabulary and broaden their horizons. Such exposure to the target language will help students acquire the vocabulary they need for writing.

## **5. RESULTS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 Results of the study:**

With reference to the analysis and discussion of the students' writing performance and the analysis of the interviews, the study has come out with the result that the following factors contribute to most of writing errors and weak writing performance in English paragraph of Saudi EFL university learners:

- (1) EFL university students' EFL students' ignorance of English rules for formatting elements of paragraph. This ignorance may be related to the teacher's ways of teaching and to the student's carelessness and lack of motivation and practice.
- (2) EFL university students' lack of follow-up to the students' writing activities.
- (3) EFL university students' lack of motivation
- (4) EFL university students' lack of the adequate stock of vocabulary which results from insufficient English language proficiency, so they have difficulty in creating, supporting or organizing the ideas
- (5) Inappropriate teaching methods and strategies.
- (6) Lack of writing practice in and outside classroom
- (7) EFL university students do not get the suitable feedback.

## 5.2 Conclusion:

Learning and teaching writing in a second language are very challenging tasks because of the myriad of affective, linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural factors involved. The main aim of this paper has been to assess and analyze errors in organizational structure and formatting elements of Saudi EFL university students' written paragraph. The results of this study, which in many ways is similar to the findings of some previous studies. The study has come out with the result that some factors contribute to most of writing errors and weak writing performance of Saudi EFL university learners such as: EFL learners' lack of the adequate stock of vocabulary. Moreover, there is inefficiency in writing because EFL learners don't get the suitable feedback. Besides that there insufficient activities and practice of basic techniques of writing besides lack of follow-up to the students' writing performance. Finally, the paper recommends that there should be close and continuous follow-up to the students' writing activities.

## 5.3 Recommendations and Pedagogical Implications of the Research Paper:

According to the results which have been arrived at in this part, the following points should be considered relevant pedagogical implications and recommendations which may represent some guidelines for the EFL teachers and EFL students:

- (1) EFL university students are to be guided to the basic techniques of paragraph writing and they should practice reading good paragraph models so as to view how writers compose, organize, paragraph and construct their writings.
- (2) EFL university instructors should give their students sufficient activities of paragraph writing besides giving more emphasis to the teaching of elements of formatting paragraph and the major components of paragraph.
- (3) There should be close and continuous follow-up to the students' writing activities.
- (4) EFL university instructors should encourage their students to read books of literature in the target language in order to enrich their vocabulary and broaden their horizons.
- (5) EFL university instructors should apply different teaching methods and strategies.

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