

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON DIFFICULTIES IN PARAGRAPH WRITING AND THEIR STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THE DIFFICULTIES

Ida Ayu Mela Tustiawati¹⁾, Ida Bagus Suharta Adi Wiguna²⁾

^{1,2} Faculty of Foreign Languages

Mahasaraswati Denpasar University

Denpasar, Indonesia

Email address: mela.tustiawati@unmas.ac.id

Abstract

This paper describes the result of student self-reflection on their writing ability and the strategies used to overcome the difficulties in paragraph writing in their academic writing class. The data was collected through a self-reflection written by the participants. The students were guided to reflect on their learning experience in two aspects: their views on their writing ability and the strategies used to overcome the difficulties in paragraph writing in the classroom. Twenty-one 4th semester students of the English literature program from the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Mahasaraswati Denpasar University, were chosen as the participants for this study through a purposive sampling method. This method was suitable because these students have gone through the same learning experience with a similar context, which provided enough data for the study. The result of their self-reflection was analyzed using a qualitative approach. The findings indicate that more than half of the participants perceived grammar as their most common problem when writing paragraphs. Second to that, half of the participants stated vocabulary and small number of students stated figurative language. In terms of the strategies used, the majority of participants stated that read more literature was the best option, followed by taking notes, and the third was paraphrasing.

Keywords – *Writing, self-reflection, Paragraph*

Introduction

On a global scale, English is widely recognized and utilized. Its significance is evident in various aspects of people's daily lives, serving as a vital means of communication when engaging with individuals from diverse countries, facilitating international travel, and playing an integral role in activities involving technology and the internet, such as browsing information online. English is spoken by people of all races and stands out as one of the most widely used languages globally (Ilyosovna, 2020), boasting one of the largest numbers of speakers worldwide. As the most widely spoken language today, English's significance cannot be downplayed or ignored (Nishanthi, 2018). Many countries have chosen to make English a main subject taught throughout school levels. In Indonesia, English is a mandatory subject for secondary and tertiary education (Amri, 2022). However, in practice, various education levels in Indonesia have begun introducing English in their teaching and learning methods as early as early childhood education. This trend illustrates that, even though English is still considered a foreign language, it holds a crucial position in the education system in Indonesia. This strategic

integration also underscores the recognition of English as a key tool for educational and global communication needs.

Learning English requires students to acquire sufficient proficiency in four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. To be considered fluent, students must learn how to master these four skills. However, in practice, the focus of teaching and learning English in Indonesia has been heavily weighted towards the ability to speak the language for communication. It is evident that less emphasis is given to students' ability to master the language in written form. It should be understood that mastering the language in both spoken and written forms is equally important. Similar to speaking, writing serves as an expression of thoughts, feelings, desires, events, and dreams in written form (Kula & Tekkol, 2019), becoming a non-verbal means to convey ideas. Some things can be communicated orally, while others must be delivered in writing. Thus, focusing on one aspect may not adequately prepare students for their future language learning.

Due to the strong emphasis on speaking ability, many students have low or inadequate writing skills. Some even struggle with fundamental aspects such as constructing a topic sentence, developing supporting sentences, and creating a concluding sentence within a paragraph. Neglecting the practice of paragraph writing perpetuates the misconception that it is an optional skill. If students cannot write well-structured paragraphs, it will inevitably lead to a decrease in their grades in academic classes and hinder their ability to perform well outside of educational institutions in the future. The importance of developing strong writing skills becomes evident as English is formally taught in educational institutions (Tustiawati & Marantika, 2023). Therefore, students should be prepared to learn writing to enhance their English skills.

Several studies have documented that writing is perceived as the most challenging and demanding skill to master by students in educational institutions (Santri, Ikhsanudin, & Rezeki, 2022; Rosidiana, 2019; Ananda et al., 2014). This challenge is particularly pronounced in academic writing, where the process involves not only generating ideas but also structuring them appropriately, applying punctuation, ensuring grammatical accuracy, and incorporating other language features of English. Additionally, it requires mental courage, as students need to trust their capacity to write. Aunurrahman (2019) stated that students who lack confidence in their writing ability may procrastinate or experience writer's block, making writing activities increasingly difficult to complete. Therefore, qualified writing skills play a crucial role in learning English, serving as a foundation to support other English skills like reading, listening, and speaking. Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal (2016) noted that an improvement in writing skills reflects the development of overall language proficiency, indicating success in the learning process. Durga & Rao (2018) added that students with excellent writing abilities can effectively express their thoughts and articulate their goals, showcasing the positive impact of mastering writing skills on students' English proficiency, especially in speaking and socializing.

Various research has provided insights into university students' difficulties and strategies in paragraph writing. Fadda's (2012) research highlighted several challenges, including the need to avoid problematic words and phrases, difficulties in grammar, pronoun usage, maintaining pronoun-antecedent agreement, subject-verb agreement, and creating

coherent sentences. Studies on writing strategies underscore their significance for learners' success in writing classes, with the argument that how and when learners employ these strategies reflects their competence as writers. Therefore, there have been suggestions to promote their use in language classrooms.

In this study, students' reflections serve as the primary source of data. Investigating their perspectives is considered the most effective way to evaluate the overall program in the academic classroom (Dewi, 2021). This approach helps measure students' understanding of their ability to write academic paragraphs. As the main participants in academic learning activities, students provide valuable information to enhance activities or guide educators in developing better activities for their academic classes. The reflective activity enables students to assess their own abilities and evaluate the teaching and learning procedures in the classroom. Moreover, as the study is designed for students to reflect on their experiences, they can identify methods and activities that best assist them in their writing practice. To achieve these aims, two research questions were addressed throughout the study, as follows:

1. What are the students' difficulties in paragraph writing?
2. What strategies are used by students in paragraph writing?

Methods

This research is designed as qualitative research because it aligns with the topic of the problem. The study involved 21 students who were enrolled in the academic writing class at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Mahasaraswati Denpasar University in the academic year 2022-2023. Their English language proficiency varied from beginner to intermediate and advanced levels. The students had experience in writing in English during their first, second, third, and ongoing fourth semesters at the university, aiming to provide them with knowledge of writing skills.

Data for the study were collected through a self-reflection sheet given to the students in the form of a Google Form. The students were guided to reflect on their learning experience in two aspects: their views on their paragraph writing difficulties and the strategies used in the academic writing classroom. Students were free to write answers to the questions in any way they chose within the boundaries of the two reflection aspects mentioned above. This method was administered to help the students feel comfortable with the process and enable them to describe their experiences thoroughly and honestly.

Finding and Discussion

Findings from the study show that the majority of the participants have experienced a long period of time learning English, ranging from 5 to 10 years. Specifically, 48% of the students have learned English for more than 10 years, 28% reported learning English for 5 to 10 years, and finally, 24% mentioned that they have formally learned English for less than 5 years. This finding indicates that they have been learning English since their time in primary school. This aligns with the earlier findings by Ariebowo (2021), who reported that most students experience learning English for more than ten years in school.

Students' perception on their English writing ability

The data on students' perception on their writing ability fell into three categories. The chart below shows the percentage of students in each category.

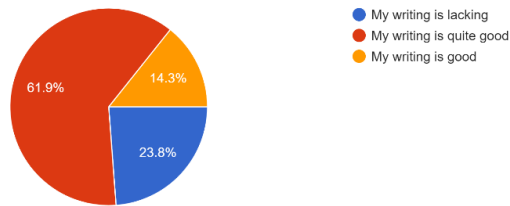


Figure 1. Students' Perception on Their Writing Ability

The data show that 62% or more than half of the students admitted that they considered their writing skills quite good. This finding contrasts with the results of an earlier study conducted by Tustiawati & Marantika (2023), in which they reported that more than half of the participants viewed their writing skills as lacking, even though they were in their fourth semester learning the English language as a major at the university level. Although the number is not as high as in the earlier study, 24% of the students still mentioned their writing skills as lacking, and they need constant guidance to help them with their writing products and writing process. Only 14% of the students were confident in saying that their writing skill is good.

Students' perception on the Difficulties found in Paragraph Writing

The data on students' perception on the difficulties found in paragraph writing have been collected. Out of all the answers given, the findings fell into the three most frequent answers to be analyzed. The chart below shows the percentage of students in each category and how many students were stated those answers.

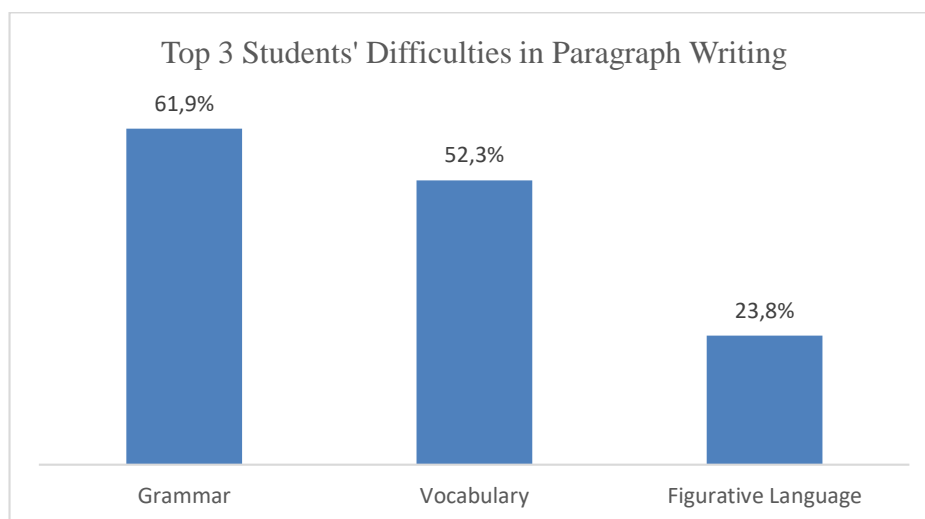


Figure 2. Students' Perception on the Difficulties in Paragraph Writing

The data shows that 62% or majority of the students reported that they considered grammar as the most difficult thing to practice in their writing products. It is marked as the top 1 answer for this cluster. Following it in second place is vocabulary with 52% of the students mentioned that answer. Lastly, only 24% of the students were saying that figurative language is one of the difficulties in writing paragraphs.

Theme 1 – Grammar

The findings reveal that a significant majority of participants identify grammar as their most prevalent challenge when composing paragraphs. Despite the frequent exposure to grammar in English learning materials, students continue to grapple with the selection of appropriate grammatical structures for their sentences. The persistence of this issue prompts a closer examination of the underlying reasons. In parallel with earlier research conducted by Tustiawati & Marantika (2023), the current study echoes students' acknowledgment that grammatical issues are a primary factor contributing to their perceived shortcomings in writing, making their compositions less engaging for readers. Below are some of the quotes related to grammar taken from the reflections:

- *The difficulties I faced are Grammar and Vocabulary*
- *My struggles are grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation.*
- *My main difficulties in paragraph writing are vocabulary, grammar, and capitalization.*

Theme 2 – Vocabulary

The research findings indicate that half of the participants identify vocabulary as one of their predominant challenges when composing paragraphs. While vocabulary is fundamental to English language acquisition, mastering an extensive lexicon is crucial for constructing coherent sentences within a paragraph. It has been mentioned in several studies that mastering vocabularies can be achieved through many methods, such as reading English books, watching English movies, and listening to English music, and many more. However, it is noteworthy that some students exhibit reluctance in adopting these strategies, compounded by a tendency to forgo note-taking during teaching and learning in the classroom. This finding is similar to findings found by Ariyanti, & Fitriana (2017), in which the students also faced misspelling vocabulary problems that contributes to the low quality of their essay. Below are some of the students' comments related to vocabulary:

- *The difficulties that I face are Grammar and Vocabulary.*
- *My struggles are grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation.*
- *The things that I find difficult even until now are vocabulary, figurative language, since I don't use it often and spelling, because I am focusing into the way we pronounce it until I don't really put an effort to learn the spelling*
- *My main difficulties in paragraph writing are vocabulary, grammar, and capitalization.*

Theme 3 – Figurative Language

The research findings highlight that five participants identified figurative language as a prominent challenge in their paragraph writing. Figurative language, characterized by a nuanced and elevated level of expression, remains a skill that is not universally mastered among students. This linguistic aspect involves the use of words in unconventional ways, deviating from standard rules and often lacking a literal interpretation. Proficiency in figurative language demands consistent and intensive practice, coupled with the invaluable guidance of expert lecturers or teaching staff to facilitate effective learning. Similar to the findings found in the study undertaken by Hutauruk (2019), the results show that students need more hours to learn about figurative language, including the definitions, the functions, and the identification practice. Below are some of the students’ comments related to “figurative language” taken from the reflections:

- *The things that I find difficult even until now are vocabulary that is still stuck in certain categories (I don't really know the advanced ones), figurative language since I don't use it often, and spelling because I am focusing on the way we pronounce it until I don't really put an effort to learn the spelling.*
- *My difficulties include capitalization, spelling, punctuation, and figurative language.*

Students’ perception on the strategies used in Paragraph Writing

The data on students’ perception on the strategies used in paragraph writing fell into three categories. The chart below shows the percentage of students in each category.

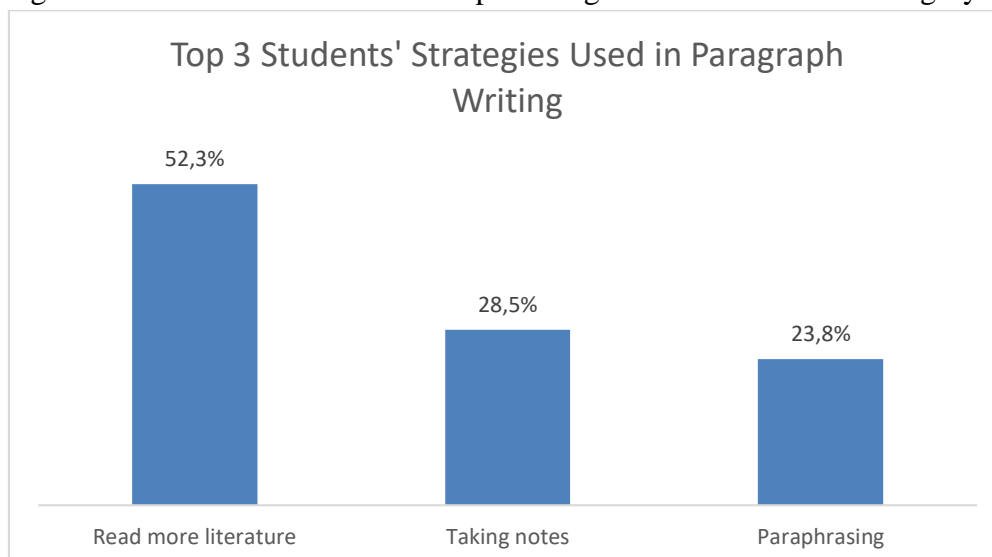


Figure 3. Students' Perception on the Strategies Used in Paragraph Writing

The data reveals that the most frequently cited strategy employed in paragraph writing is reading more literature, with 52% or half of the students acknowledging this approach. A total of 11 students expressed reliance on this strategy. In the second position, taking notes garnered 29% of mentions, as stated by 6 students. Paraphrasing emerged as the third strategy,

with only 24% of students, totaling 5 individuals, indicating its use in their paragraph writing approach.

Theme 1 – Read More Literature

The research findings indicate that half of the participants identified "reading more literature" as the most frequently chosen strategy for writing paragraphs. This encompasses various sources such as journals, articles, essays, and books. The inclination towards this strategy is logical, considering the myriad benefits it offers students, including the expansion of vocabulary through exposure to diverse words, gaining insights into current information, and fostering emotional intelligence. However, it is noteworthy that a significant number of students in Indonesia exhibit reluctance toward reading books. A study conducted by PISA (2015) on reading literacy among Indonesian students revealed a low ranking, with Indonesia placed 64th out of 72 countries included in the study (Rintaningrum, 2019). This starkly reflects the limited interest in reading within the Indonesian context. This trend aligns with the observations in a study by Rintaningrum (2019), where students emphasized that reading contributes to problem-solving skills. The challenge of low interest in reading poses a substantial hurdle, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to cultivate a greater appreciation for reading among Indonesian students. Below are the quotes related to "Read more literature" taken from this reflection:

- Read more words that I have never known before and see various writings from foreigners on social media.
- My strategies are to read more and learn more grammar.
- In my opinion, reading more literature is crucial.
- My strategies when it comes to writing are reading more articles, avoiding redundancy, and paraphrasing.
- My strategies include reading more journals, learning from social media, and paraphrasing.
- Read more English articles from international media, especially news; therefore, it will help me to know how to use formal English. More reading is the key.

Theme 2 – Taking Notes

The research findings indicate that participants identified taking notes as their second most frequently employed strategy in paragraph writing. The inclusion of note-taking in their strategies did not come as a surprise, given the well-established benefits it offers to students. Actively engaging in note-taking during classes serves as a valuable tool to enhance focus and understanding of the material presented. Effective note-taking contributes to improved listening skills, enhanced comprehension of material, and better retention. These observations align with a prior study conducted by Salame & Thompson (2020), where students concurred that note-taking is a crucial strategy for ensuring success in classes, proving beneficial for studying, and facilitating knowledge acquisition. Below are some quotes taken from the students' reflection:

- *Taking notes during English lessons is helpful because it allows us to rewrite the material or certain information in our own words. Thus, it greatly contributes to practicing our writing skills.*
- *Taking notes and exercising are a couple of my key points.*

Theme 3 – Paraphrasing

The research findings reveal that participants identified paraphrasing as their third most frequently utilized strategy in paragraph writing. Paraphrasing has become an integral aspect of student writing, often employed to enhance clarity, develop each student's unique writing style, and prevent plagiarism. In essence, paraphrasing entails expressing someone else's ideas or opinions in one's own words. This stands in contrast to plagiarism, which occurs when someone uses another person's ideas in their paper without altering the sentence structure through paraphrasing and fails to provide proper credit through citations. However, the outcomes of a previous study conducted by Rusdianto & Fitrawati (2022) indicate that the average score for students' paraphrased quality in paraphrasing a paragraph text is unsatisfactory. This suggests that there may be challenges or areas for improvement in the students' proficiency in implementing effective paraphrasing techniques. Below are the quotes related to “Paraphrasing” taken from this reflection:

- *My strategies when it comes to writing are to read more articles, avoid redundancy, and paraphrase.*
- *My strategies include reading more journals, learning from social media, and paraphrasing.*

Conclusion

Firstly, the open-ended question probing their difficulties in paragraph writing revealed insights into how students perceive their writing abilities. Grammar emerged as the most common challenge for over half of the students, followed by vocabulary, noted by half of the students, and figurative language, identified by a smaller number of students. These perceptions seem closely linked to the students' insecurities when engaging in writing tasks within the classroom. These three issues are consistently mentioned and discussed in class, highlighting the need for targeted exercises to address grammatical problems, vocabulary limitations, and figurative language knowledge, enhancing confidence levels in addressing these writing challenges.

Secondly, the results highlighted the strategies employed by students to overcome their writing difficulties. A significant majority of students regarded reading more literature as their go-to solution, encompassing various sources such as journals, articles, essays, and books. Taking notes emerged as the second most frequently mentioned strategy, a common practice in day-to-day classes. Paraphrasing, surprisingly utilized by a considerable number of students.

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