

SENTENCE STRUCTURE PROBLEMS AND PARAGRAPH BUILDING IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING ABILITY

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Abstract: The research is conducted to identify issues of sentence structure and paragraph building in academic writing ability. The objectives are to identify the most and the least common problems found in both variables. The data are sixty paragraphs of freshmen of three faculties of a state university in Depok, West Java. Descriptive analysis and Content analysis are the two methods which are used to analyze the data. The findings of the research are divided into two groups: Sentence Structure Problems and Paragraph building problems. For the first category the most common problems are the inappropriate use of Grammar Points, Lexical Units, and Cohesive Device, and the least are Punctuation, Run-On, and Stringy sentences. In the scope of paragraph building, not providing supporting details and irrelevant sentences are the most common problems; as for the least problems are irrelevant sentences and transition sentences.

Key Words: Sentence Structure Problems; Paragraph Building; Academic Writing Ability.

Introduction

According to an introduction in a book titled *Teaching Academic Writing: A toolkit for higher education* (Caroline Coffin, et. all, 2005), Caroline states: *Student academic writing is at the heart of teaching and learning in higher education. Students are assessed largely by what they write, and need to learn both general academic conventions as well as disciplinary writing requirements in order to be successful in higher education.* The quotation states the importance of academic writing skills for university students, including Indonesians university students.

There are two reasons why academic writing skills are important. The first reason is that the writing is the proof of the students' critical thinking skills such as identifying, analyzing, and synthesizing a problem or an issue which relates to their studies.

The second reason is that the product of academic writing can be used as a tool for learning. What the students have written will be read by other students that can be treated as knowledge which other fellow students may need in relation to their study.

In the context of academic writing, the students also need to learn and understand the formats and characteristics of academic writing. Some examples of the formats are a paragraph, an essay, or an article. As for the characteristics, the use of formal language, various formats, and patterns of organizing ideas are some of the examples.

Improving and developing academic writing skills are not easy that problems are still commonly found the students' writings. The problems cover different areas and aspects which may have caused the writings to become incomprehensible. For Indonesian university students, acquiring the academic writing



skills are also difficult as they have to be proficient in English language, have to have the skills of using the academic lexical units, as well as have to be able to apply the academic writing formats.

In acquiring a foreign language, the learners must have proficiency in all four language skills: Listening, Reading, Speaking, and Writing. From all of the skills, acquiring proficiency in Writing is considered the most difficult if not the most challenging. To gain proficiency, the learners need to have sound knowledge of the micro skills and macro skills. These skills are needed, so the learners or students can improve and develop their writing skills.

According to Weigle, (2002) there is a connection between writing and critical thinking:

Writing and critical thinking are seen as closely linked, and expertise in writing is seen as an indication that students have mastered the cognitive skills required for university work...lack of writing expertise is frequently seen as a sign that students do not possess the appropriate thinking and reasoning skills that they need to succeed (Weigle,2002: p. 5)

Based on the writer's experience, Indonesian university students face various problems when it comes to producing an academic writing composition. To help them in improving as well as developing their writing skills, it is to the writer's believe that research should be conducted to identify the major problems in the scope of academic writing ability, so better teaching strategies can be formulated to help the students improve or even develop their writing skills. It is hoped that the students can finally produce academic written texts with better quality to be accepted for academic purposes.

Based on the brief discussion above, in this study there are two main issues that are addressed: 1) Sentence Structure Problems in Undergraduate University Students' Academic Writing Ability, and 2) Paragraph Building in Undergraduate University Students' Academic Writing Ability.

Method

This Qualitative research used two methods: Descriptive Analysis and Content Analysis. In applying those techniques, the writer analyzed students' work in a form of a paragraph. First, the writer analyzed the individual sentences of the paragraph to identify types of sentences and their sentence structure problems. Second, the writer analyzed how the paragraph was built by referring to the aspects of paragraph structure, patterns of organizations, and techniques of paragraph building

The data used in this research were the works of undergraduate freshmen of three faculties of a state university in Depok. They were the paragraphs which were written and submitted as Mid Semester Test materials of General Academic English course. The data were stored as a soft copy form in their lecturers' Google Classroom' application which could be accessed by the writer to be down loaded and to be saved in the writer's laptop. The population of the data was 105 paragraphs and the writer analyzed 20 paragraphs of each faculty, so in total there were 60 paragraphs which were written in 100 to 150 words of various topics. The data were copied and pasted onto two tables which were created by the writer. Then using the data in the tables, the writer analyzed them based on the two variables of the research: Sentence Structure Problems and Paragraph Building in the context of Academic Writing. By applying these strategies, the writer managed to analyze, to take notes, as well as to record the findings which later on treated as the results of the research.

Due to the pandemic situation, the research was conducted at the writer's residence and because all data were stored in the writer's laptop. It took about four months to conduct the research, from September 2020 to January 2021. The main instrument was the writer herself which analyzed the data using her laptop.

The two tables below are the samples of how the data were copied from the Google Classroom, how they were analyzed and how the findings were recorded to be treated as the results of the research. The first table contained the original copy of the paragraph and its analysis on sentence structure problems. The writer analyzed the sentence one by one, identified the sentence structure problems, gave suggestions on how it should have been written, summarized the findings. As the second table was used to analyze the same paragraph from the point of view of paragraph building. The analysis focused on the paragraph structure, techniques of developing ideas, and patterns of organizations. By focusing on those aspects, the writer took some notes to decide whether the paragraph was built well as a piece of written information or not.

Table 1 Sample of Analysis of Sentence Structure Problems

| | |
|---|--|
| Variable 1: Sentence Structure Problems | Data Code: FoCS/04/2019 |
| Topic: What are the pros/cons of online transport services? | |
| General Description: The paragraph is written in 150 words and 11 sentences. In terms of number of words and sentences, the student has fulfilled the requirements. Unfortunately, the writer has identified some problems in sentence structure aspects which will be analyzed below. | |
| <i>There is some reason why online transportation is good transportation in Indonesia (1). First, you can order "ojek" or "taxi" in Indonesia just by your phone, anytime, anywhere (2) Second, online transportation has a cheap cost than traditional transportation (3). Third, most of all online transportation has a good safety like taxis must have some requirements (4). But, there is some problem with online transportation (5). Some people use online transportation to make a crime (6). For example, there is a fake order and it is very unsettling for a driver who looking for money (7). Until now, the company of online transportation can not detect which is a real order or fake order (8). So, online transportation in a good solution for people who like easy mobility (9). But the government must have a rule for online transportation (10). We as consumers also be vigilant with online transportation fraud. Technology can be a better solution according to its users (11).</i> | |
| Analysis on Sentence Structure Problems | |
| Sentence no. 1 | This Simple sentence has grammatical and lexical unit problems which make the meaning become unclear. Suggestion: <i>There are some reasons why online transportation is a good choice of transportation in Indonesia.</i> |
| Sentence no. 2 | This Simple sentence has grammatical and lexical unit problems which make the meaning become unclear. Suggestion: <i>First, whenever you need to travel anywhere, you can order "ojek" or "taxi" just by using your mobile phones.</i> |
| Sentence no. 3 | This Simple sentence has grammatical and lexical unit problems which make the meaning become unclear. Suggestion: <i>Second, the cost of online transportation is cheaper than the off-line one.</i> |
| Sentence no. 4 | This Simple sentence has grammatical and lexical unit problems which make the meaning become unclear. Suggestion: <i>Third, most online transportation is as safe as the official taxis, such as Blue Bird taxis.</i> |
| Sentence no. 5 | This Simple sentence has cohesive-device problem which makes the meaning becomes unclear. Suggestion: <i>Besides its good points, online transportation also has its negative points.</i> |
| Sentence no. 6 | This Simple sentence has cohesive-device and lexical unit problems which make the meaning become unclear. Suggestion: <i>First, some people use online transportation to commit a crime.</i> |
| Sentence no. 7 | This Simple sentence has lexical unit problem which makes the meaning becomes unclear. This sentence can be revised into a Compound sentence. Suggestion: <i>For example, the criminals make a fake order, so they can rob the drivers or riders</i> |
| Sentence no. 8 | This Simple sentence has grammatical and lexical unit problems which make the meaning becomes unclear. Suggestion: <i>Until now, the company which provides online transportation cannot detect which order is real and which one is fake.</i> |
| Sentence no. 9 until 11 | These Complex and Simple sentences have similar ideas, but they are written separately that they become Choppy sentences. To improve them, the sentences need to be revised by changing some of the lexical units, cohesive devices, and also grammar points. Suggestion: |

| | |
|---|---|
| | <i>So, online transportation is a good solution for people who like easy mobility. However, the government should make rules which protect its users, and the drivers and riders should be more careful in taking orders.</i> |
| Summary on Sentence Structure Problems | |
| The paragraph is written using two types of sentence structures: Simple and Complex sentences. As for the problems which can be identified are: Choppy sentence, inappropriate use of cohesive devices, grammar points, lexical units. Because of the problems, the information delivered is not clear that some of the sentences need to be revised. | |

Table 2 Sample of Analysis on Paragraph Building

| | | |
|---|--|---------------------------------|
| Variable 2: Paragraph Building | | Data Code: FoCS /04/2019 |
| Topic: What are the pros/cons of online transport services? | | |
| General Description: | | |
| The paragraph is written in 150 words and 11 sentences. Based on the given topic, the student should write a Classification paragraph where he or she should share his or her ideas about the pros/cons of online transport services. As in terms of paragraph structure, the sentences should represent: a Topic Sentence, several Supporting Sentences and their supporting details, and a Concluding Sentence. However, in terms of building it, the writer has noticed some problems which will be addressed below. | | |
| <i>There is some reason why online transportation is good transportation in Indonesia (1). First, you can order "ojek" or "taxi" in Indonesia just by your phone, anytime, anywhere (2) Second, online transportation has a cheap cost than traditional transportation (3). Third, most of all online transportation has a good safety like taxis must have some requirements (4). But, there is some problem with online transportation (5). Some people use online transportation to make a crime (6). For example, there is a fake order and it is very unsettling for a driver who looking for money (7). Until now, the company of online transportation can not detect which is a real order or fake order (8). So, online transportation is a good solution for people who like easy mobility (9). But the government must have a rule for online transportation (10). We as consumers also be vigilant with online transportation fraud. Technology can be a better solution according to its users (11).</i> | | |
| Patterns of Organization | | Classification |
| Analysis on Paragraph Building | | |
| Sentence no. 1 | Despite having some grammatical and lexical- unit problems, this sentences can be considered as the Topic Sentence as it states the topic and controlling ideas. | |
| Sentence no. 2 until 4 | Despite having some grammatical, punctuation, discourse-marker, and lexical unit problems, these sentences can be considered as the first, second, and third Supporting sentences. They focus on the student's pros ideas of online transportation. However, they are not developed further by using statements of supporting details. | |
| Sentence no. 5 | Despite having some grammatical, punctuation, discourse-marker, and lexical unit problems, this sentence can be considered as the transition sentence which introduces the cons of online transportation. | |
| Sentence no. 6 until 8 | Despite having some grammatical, punctuation, discourse-marker, and lexical unit problems, these sentences can be considered as the first Supporting sentence which focuses on the student's cons idea of online transportation. This sentence is also given two sentences of supporting details. | |
| Sentence no. 9 | This sentence cannot be considered as the Concluding sentence. First, it does not restate the topic sentence; second, it does not summarize the main discussion. | |
| Sentence no. 10 and 11 | These sentences are irrelevant as they introduce the student's personal statements. These sentences main ideas are supposed to be included in sentence to make a Concluding sentence. | |
| Summary on Paragraph Building | | |
| The paragraph is not built or developed properly to make a Classification paragraph. It covers both sides of the topic: pros and cons; however, most of the controlling ideas are given supporting details. In addition, it can be considered that the Concluding sentence does not fulfill the basic requirements as it does not restate and summarize the main ideas in the paragraph. In addition, it also introduces some new ideas after the concluding sentence which makes irrelevant to the topic. So, this paragraph is not well-developed as it does not apply the basic requirements for building a Classification paragraph. | | |

Results and Discussion

In order to show the different features of the findings, the writer put all findings in a form of a table. The objectives are to identify the most common and the least major features as well as the most and the least common problems found in the students' writings.



The data is presented in a form of percentage to identify the trends of the features of both variables. In calculating the data, the writer used the Excel formulas of Microsoft Windows 10 installed in the writer's laptop. The following visual graphs describe the findings of the research.

Variable 1: Sentence Structure Problems
Table 3 Sentence Structure Problems – All Faculties

| Types of Sentence Structure Problems – All Faculties | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|----|----------------|-----|----------------|----|----------|-------|------------|--|
| No | Aspects | Faculty Humanities | of | Faculty Health | of | Public Science | of | Computer | Total | Percentage | |
| 1. | Fragment | 26 | | | 12 | | | 12 | 50 | 5.26 % | |
| 2. | Run On | 9 | | | 3 | | | 15 | 27 | 2.84% | |
| 3. | Comma Splice | 25 | | | 18 | | | 17 | 60 | 6.31% | |
| 4. | Choppy | 9 | | | 18 | | | 28 | 55 | 5.78% | |
| 5. | Stringy | 4 | | | 6 | | | 7 | 17 | 1.79% | |
| 6. | Grammar points | 92 | | | 117 | | | 98 | 307 | 32.28% | |
| 7. | Lexical Units | 69 | | | 119 | | | 16 | 204 | 21.45% | |
| 8. | Cohesive Device | 17 | | | 38 | | | 71 | 126 | 13.25% | |
| 9. | Parallel Structure | 7 | | | 18 | | | 10 | 35 | 3.68% | |
| 10. | Punctuation | 2 | | | 9 | | | 4 | 15 | 1.58% | |
| 11. | No Problems | 33 | | | 14 | | | 8 | 55 | 5.78% | |
| | | 293 | | | 372 | | | 286 | 951 | 100,00 | |

From table 3 above, there are 11 sentence structure problems that have been identified in all of the 60 paragraphs which were written by the students of the three faculties. Out of those problems the most common ones are Grammar Points (32.28%), Lexical Units (21.45%), and for Cohesive Device (13.25%). As for the least common problems, the figures are 1.58% for Punctuation, 1.79% for Stringy sentence, and 2.84% for Run-On sentences.

Variable 2: Paragraph Building
Table 5 Elements of Paragraph Structure – All Faculties

| | Elements of Paragraph Structure- all Faculties | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|--|-----|-----|--------|---------------|-----|-----|--------|
| | Fulfilled | | | | Not Fulfilled | | | |
| | FHM | FPH | FCS | % | FHM | FPH | FCS | % |
| Topic Sentence | 13 | 17 | 19 | 81.67% | 7 | 3 | 1 | 18.33% |
| Supporting Sentences | 13 | 18 | 17 | 80.00% | 7 | 2 | 3 | 20.00% |
| Supporting Details | 9 | 14 | 15 | 63.33% | 11 | 6 | 5 | 36.67% |
| Concluding Sentence | 13 | 17 | 13 | 71.67% | 7 | 3 | 7 | 28.33% |

*) FHM: Faculty of Humanities; FPH: Faculty of Public Health; FCS: Faculty of Computer Science

In terms of paragraph structure, the figures show that: 81.66% of the paragraphs have Topic Sentences, 80% have developed the controlling ideas by using the Supporting Sentences, 63.33% have developed further the ideas by giving Supporting Details, and 71.66% have ended the paragraphs by Concluding sentences.



Based on those data, in terms of Paragraph Structure, it can be stated that most students are able to apply the elements of paragraph structure in their writings. However, in terms of building the main ideas of the topics, only 63.33% have managed to do it by writing some Supporting Details.

Table 6 - Four Aspects of Paragraph Building – All Faculties

| No. | Aspects | Four Aspects of Paragraph Building – All Faculties | | | Total | Percentage |
|-----|---|--|-----|-----|-------|------------|
| | | FHM | FPH | FCS | | |
| 1 | Properly | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3.33% |
| | Quite Properly | 11 | 17 | 19 | 47 | 78.33% |
| | Failed | 7 | 3 | 1 | 11 | 18.33% |
| 2 | Supporting Details – Fulfilled | 8 | 14 | 9 | 31 | 51.67% |
| | Supporting Details - Not Fulfilled | 12 | 6 | 11 | 29 | 48.33% |
| 3 | Patterns of Organizations – Fulfilled | 13 | 17 | 19 | 49 | 81.67% |
| | Patterns of Organizations - Not Fulfilled | 7 | 3 | 1 | 11 | 18.33% |
| 4 | Irrelevant Sentences | 61 | 20 | 13 | 94 | 16.58 % |
| | Transition Sentences | 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0.88 % |

*) FHM: Faculty of Humanities; FPH: Faculty of Public Health; FCS: Faculty of Computer Science

There are four aspects of Paragraph Building that are analyzed. Properness which relates to how well the students have applied the paragraph structure in their writings. The second one is how well the students have used the use of Supporting Details to develop the main ideas. The third one is how well the students have applied the appropriate format of Patterns of Organizations, and the fourth aspect is identifying the irrelevant and transition sentences.

In terms of Properness as the first aspect, the figures show that the students' writings can be categorized as Quite Properly written with the percentage of 78.33% which means that the students have managed to apply the paragraph structure. As for the second aspect, the figure is lower with only 51.67% of the students' writings have used Supporting Details to develop the main ideas. It can be said that the students still have problems in building the paragraphs to make them as comprehensive and coherent kind of writings. In terms of applying the appropriate patterns of organizations, 81.67% of the students have written the paragraphs in their right formats such as Argumentative, Classification, and Cause-Effect patterns. The last aspect which relates to paragraph building is the fact that there are some irrelevant sentences and transition sentences which were found in the students' writings. Irrelevant sentences are sentences which are off topic that cause the main ideas become incoherent. Whereas transition sentences are sentences which connect the main idea of one paragraph with the others to make the information flows smoothly and helps the audience to understand it. The figure for irrelevant sentences is 16.58% which can be said not significant or there are a small number of irrelevant sentences in the students' writings. As for the use of transition sentences, the figure is 0.88% which means only a small number of students have used this technique in their writings.

Conclusions

Based on the figures above, it can be concluded that the students have managed to write the paragraphs using appropriate structure and patterns of organizations, but they still experience problems in applying the supporting details, relevant sentences, and transition sentences which have influenced the coherency of the message.

1. Sentence Structure Problems.



It can be pointed out that the some of the students' writings are not written grammatically and contextually correct. The effect of having those problems mentioned above, the students' writings are difficult to comprehend. In other words, the problems have influenced the coherency of the whole message.

In the context of Academic Writing ability, the figures show that the students' writings can be considered grammatically and contextually problematic. It can also be said that their writings cannot fully represent their critical thinking skills and may not be comprehensible to the audience to be used as a source of learning.

2. Paragraph Building

Based on the discussions above, it can be concluded that the students have managed to write the paragraphs using appropriate structure and patterns of organizations, but they still experience problems in applying the supporting details, relevant sentences, and transition sentences which have influenced the coherency of the message.

Having discussed the major findings of the two variables above, it can be concluded the students still struggles with writing sentences which are structurally correct and appropriate, but in terms of paragraph building, they have managed to write a paragraph with the appropriate structure and patterns of organizations. Two areas that the students need to improve are writing relevant sentences and transition sentences so their writing will become coherent.

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