

An Analysis of Paragraph Writing Skills of First-Year Undergraduates in the Faculty of Business Studies, University of Vavuniya, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Effective paragraph writing is a fundamental academic skill that significantly influences students' success in higher education, where written communication is a primary method of assessment. A good paragraph has a strong topic sentence, details and information that are relevant to the topic, and a summary sentence that restates the main idea. Apart from structural organization, well-constructed paragraph writing must also have adequate sentence variety, enough range of vocabulary, and employ linking words or cohesive devices that make the paragraph logically flow and coherent. However, classroom observations indicate that many undergraduate students have significant problems in developing well-structured paragraphs. In the Faculty of Business Studies, University of Vavuniya, a review of first year, first English test scripts reveals that almost 95% of students lack proficiency in the application of the basic components of good paragraph writing. These deficiencies pose questions regarding students' preparedness to fulfill the academic writing requirements of the university studies. To address this problem, the present study explored to what degree the first-year undergraduate student applies the hallmarks of paragraph writing and what are some common deficiencies found in their writing. The study used purposive sampling technique to ensure the samples were relevant to the study's aims and objectives, and consisted of 120 first year undergraduate students from the Faculty of Business Studies. The qualitative research design was used and the students' English test scripts were used as main sources of data collection. Content analysis was conducted to analyze the paragraph organization, sentence variation, vocabulary and cohesive devices. The results show that students write paragraph without considering the features of a good paragraph. Many paragraphs do not include topic, supporting, detailed and summary sentences. The students use simple sentences generally, and compound and complex sentences remain limited. The vocabulary and linking devices are limited in usage, leading to poor cohesion and limited logical progression. Therefore, a targeted teaching method and systematic teaching in paragraph writing are suggested in this study, aiming to improve the academic writing skills of undergraduate students in the ESL context at the university.

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