

Diving into Learner Difficulties in Effective Essay Paragraph Development

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Abstract— Writing skill as one of the language skills that need to be improved and practiced. Through writing, the students can express their ideas and thoughts into written form (Pentury, 2020). However, in the actual classroom set up, we encountered learners who can hardly come up an effective paragraph development in essay writing. This study sought to determine the writing difficulties of the Grade 10 learners in a public high school in the Philippine regarding to effective essay paragraph development. The respondents were the 118-sample size taken out to the 168 total population. Calculator.Net was used in getting the sample size. This paper is in quantitative research approach. In determining the said goal, researchers used an adopted survey questionnaire about Academic Writing Difficulties by University EFL Learners. The said survey questionnaire was composed of 15 questions about the writing difficulties and was conducted during English time. The statistical tools used to determine the writing difficulties of the respondents were mean and standard deviation. The mean of each item was ranked using the five-point Likert scale adopted on the same study. Findings revealed that out of 15 questions, the top five writing difficulties ranked consecutively were “difficulty in coming up with good thesis statements”, “difficulty in developing thesis statements”, “difficulty in determining whether a quotation is required or not”, “difficulty in choosing an appropriate academic word”, and “difficulty in writing coherent paragraphs”. Since experts on the field, English teachers have this advantageous role in addressing these challenges encountered by English language learners through the provision of sufficient writing practices and should allocate enough time for learners to write, since it is essential for the formation of ideas.

Keywords— Writing difficulties, paragraph development, writing, thesis statement.

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is the act of creating a persistent representation of human language. A writing system uses a set of symbols and rules to encode aspects of spoken language, such as its lexicon and syntax. However, written language may take on characteristics distinct from those of any spoken language. It is a cognitive and social activity neuropsychological and physical processes. The outcome of this activity, also called "writing", and sometimes a "text", is a series of physically inscribed, mechanically transferred, or digitally represented symbols (Harris, 2000).

Writing, as a technical skill, is not an easy skill to acquire. As a beginner, one must know the self – contained unit of discourse writing dealing with a particular point or idea know as a paragraph. A paragraph is defined as “a group of sentences or a single sentence that forms a unit” (Lunsford and Connor 116). It is considered as the building blocks of papers. Writing and putting an accurate word on a paper is quite an easy task, but writing a sentence is a bit difficult.

A good paragraph is composed of a topic sentence (or key sentence), relevant supporting sentences, and a

closing (or transition) sentence. This structure is key to keeping your paragraph focused on the main idea and creating a clear and concise image (Masterclass, 2021).

Having an exceptional skill in writing will give you an edge not only in academic but would allow you as well to land a good job opportunity. According to Demme Learning (2023) - an independent family owned and operated publishing company highlights four reasons how writing well will significantly help us, most especially the learners. First, writing is essential for academic success. Students must be able to write clearly, concisely, and intelligibly to succeed academically. This is true whether your child attends college, trade school, or another post-secondary program. Students pursuing a degree in any academic discipline will have to write in about every course—be it for a research paper, lab report, creative writing assignment, or slideshow presentation. Therefore, they’ll need to know how to write competently to successfully complete their coursework and present themselves well for higher education. Second, it is essential for employment. When your child starts applying for jobs someday, he will likely need to submit a resume and cover letter. Potential employers will form

their first impression of your child from reading their application materials. According to a 2016 National Association of College and Employers study, over 73% of employer's desire job candidates with strong writing skills.

Third, it is essential for communication. Of course, being able to write well is not just important for school and work—it's also an invaluable skill for personal, written communication. Lastly, it develops critical thinking. This process forces you to evaluate and structure your ideas, promoting deeper analysis and understanding. Writing is not just about putting words on paper; it's about engaging in a cognitive process that fosters critical thinking. Through writing, you learn to question, analyze, and articulate your thoughts with clarity and depth. By learning to write well for various contexts, your child will better understand how to convey their thoughts, feelings, and ideas for optimal understanding. This will serve them well both now and in the future.

Moreover, Selingo (2017) on The Washington Post, employers want to hire college graduates who can write coherently, think creatively, and analyze quantitative data. But the Conference Board has found in its surveys of corporate hiring leaders that writing skills are one of the biggest gaps in workplace readiness. That is why so many employers now explicitly ask for writing and communications skills in their job advertisements. An analysis by Burning Glass Technologies, which studies job trends in real time by mining data from employment ads, found that writing and communications are the most requested job requirement across nearly every industry, even fields such as information technology and engineering.

More research has investigated the benefits of writing to emotional well-being. James Pennebaker, a cognitive psychologist at the University of Texas-Austin has undertaken a series of investigations into the benefits of writing (Pennebaker, 2004), including its ability to heal emotional wounds. Short-term, focused writing can, according to Pennebaker, benefit anyone -- from persons who are dealing with terminal illness, victims of violent crime, or new college students struggling with the transition from high school. His approach is to give individuals a simple 20- minute writing assignment over four consecutive days: To write about their deepest emotions and thoughts about the upheaval that is most affecting their lives.

These brief expressive writing episodes have led participants to report feeling happier and less negative than prior to their writing experience, and having fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, according to Pennebaker. Improvement in immune system functioning (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988), fewer doctor visits (Pennebaker, Barger, & Tiebout, 1989), and greater academic performance (Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990), have been documented to result from brief expressive writing, among other positive outcomes. Further, such benefits yield regardless of age, according to Pennebaker and his colleagues.

There is also research demonstrating that writing leads to improvements in physical health. Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz, and Kaell (1999), for example, studied both asthmatic and arthritic patients who were assigned to write about either stressful events (treatment group) or emotionally neutral topics (control group). After four months, asthma patients in the treatment group showed improvements in lung function, but control group patients evidenced no change. Arthritic patients in the treatment group showed improvements in overall disease activity but controls did not change. The observed improvements were beyond those that could be attributed to the standard medical care that all participants received.

With these, it is evident how essential writing is in our emotional well-being and as a skill that every learner should be possessed, developed, and mastered by us.

Today, writing, as a skill, in the 21st century should be mastered by the English Language Learners. However, in the actual classroom set up, there are learners who hardly come up an effective paragraph development in essay writing.

According to Saavedra (2020), there are five factors that language teachers considered to have influenced the poor English and Filipino writing skills of the elementary pupils. Based on their experiences and observations while teaching writing to the pupils, the following was recorded: 1) lack of vocabulary in the target language; 2) difficulty in conveying and organizing ideas; 3) pupils' perception that writing is a hard task; 4) lack of motivation and interest in writing; and 5) the difficulty in spelling, grammar and sentence construction are the reasons why many elementary pupils have poor writing skills in English and Filipino. These factors can be attributed to the first

languages of the pupils (Chabacano, Bahasa Sug, and Cebuano), where English and Filipino are considered as L2 only. Despite the effort of teachers, they acknowledged that elementary pupils' writing skills still did not meet the standard in writing. That is why they are optimistic that following the K to 12 curricula will pave the way for improving the writing skills of the pupils, which has long been deteriorating. It is also an interesting point that curriculum planners, especially the language specialists, should look to help our pupils improve their writing skills in L2 eventually.

On the article published in SCRIBD by Ledesma (2023), Filipino students commonly struggle with writing academic papers in English for several reasons. They have difficulties with complexity because their second language exposure is limited, leading to a simpler vocabulary. They also struggle with accuracy, incorrectly using words when writing on specific topics due to a lack of varied vocabulary. Additionally, students tend to use long unfamiliar words pretentiously to seem intelligent without understanding their meanings. However, these issues have solutions like using a thesaurus, expanding daily vocabulary, and learning new words through practice and experience.

Teaching writing has become difficult because of the challenges faced by the students in learning writing skills. Some of the challenges that are faced by the ESL students are lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, poor spelling, students' readiness, and lack of exposure to books and reading materials. The challenges faced by the students have made it challenging for teachers to teach writing skills. The challenges that are faced by the teachers to teach writing skills are difficult to motivate their students, students of diverse levels, difficult materials, and time constraints to teach the students. To improve a student's writing ability, a teacher must give more attention to teach writing such as giving guidance and feedback (Moses, R. N., & Mohamad, 2019).

As Secondary English Teachers in a public high school in the Philippines, we as well encountered learning gap by our learners toward writing performances. Even when in group, learners could not even come up a well-organized paragraph, some cannot even know how to start writing, while others cannot even make one. As the

focus on the construct of this paper, this study aims to gather the underlying difficulties of these English Language Learners to effective essay paragraph development. This, in turn, innovators will be guided and eventually innovate strategies focusing on how to address the writing problem difficulties.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to determine the writing difficulties of Grade 10 – learners in a public school in the Philippines. The respondents were 118 learners out of the total population (n=168). Calculator. Net was used to determine the sampling size. Simple random sampling was used to determine the respondents. According to Thomas (2023), a simple random sampling is a randomly selected subset of a population. In this sampling method, each member of the population has an exactly equal chance of being selected. The study employed a quantitative research approach to discover the writing difficulties of the learners to an effective essay paragraph development. Meanwhile, a survey questionnaire used by of Dr. Shaban Aldabbus of the University of Bharain and Ennaji Almansouri, a faculty of the University of Benghazi on their study Academic Writing Difficulties by University EFL Learners was adopted during the conduct. The said survey questionnaire was composed of 15 questions and was conducted during English hour. The statistical tools used to determine the writing difficulties of the Grade 10 learners were mean and standard deviation. The mean of each item was ranked using the five-point Likert scale adopted on the same study.

III. RESUTS

This section explores the difficulties encountered by the Grade 10 learners to effective essay paragraph development in their writing lesson in English 10. Table 1 shows the weighted average, responses, and levels according to the five – point Likert scale. Table 2 is divided into Table 2.1 and Table 2.2. Table 2.1 shows the weighted arithmetic and standard deviation of the study questionnaire of the top five writing difficulties to effective essay paragraph development, while Table 2.2 shows the weighted arithmetic and standard deviation of the study questionnaire of the top sixth to fifteenth writing difficulties to effective essay paragraph development.

Table 1. Weighted Average, Responses, and Levels According to the Five-point Likert Scale.

Weighted Average	Responses	Level
From 1 to 1.80	Never	Very Easy
<1.80 to 2.60	Rarely	Easy

<2.60 to 3.40	Sometimes	Neutral
<3.40 to 4.20	Often	Difficult
<4.2 to 5	Most Often	Very Difficult

The goal is to identify the level of difficulties encountered by the Grade 10 learners in writing an effective essay paragraph development. To achieve this goal, the weighted means and standard deviation of the

responses of the 118-sample size were extracted and compared with the arithmetic mean of the five-point Likert scale, and their difficulties in writing essay was also determined.

Table 2.1 Weighted Arithmetic and Standard Deviation of the Writing Difficulties (Part 1)

Writing Difficulties	M	SD	Ranking According to the Difficulties	Level
I have difficulty in coming up with good thesis statement.	2.90	0.81	1	Neutral
I have difficulty in developing thesis statement.	2.86	0.99	2	Neutral
I have difficulty in determining whether a quotation is required or not.	2.85	1.06	3.5	Neutral
I have difficulty in choosing the appropriate academic words.	2.85	1.14	3.5	Neutral
I have difficulty in writing coherent paragraphs.	2.82	0.88	5	Neutral

Table 2.2 Weighted Arithmetic and Standard Deviation of the Writing Difficulties (Part 2)

Writing Difficulties	M	SD	Ranking According to the Difficulties	Level
I have difficulty in organizing my ideas.	2.81	1.02	6	Neutral
I have difficulty in avoiding plagiarism.	2.80	1.02	7.5	Neutral
I have difficulty using grammar correctly (word classes, subject – verb agreement, forms of singular and plural)	2.80	1.01	7.5	Neutral
I have difficulty in documenting sources.	2.78	0.94	9	Neutral
I have difficulty in writing strong conclusion	2.70	1.00	10	Neutral
I have difficulty deciding how to start my writing.	2.69	0.93	11	Neutral
I have difficulty in paraphrasing ideas taken from other sources.	2.68	0.89	12	Neutral
I have difficulty in generating thoughtful ideas.	2.66	1.02	13	Neutral
I have difficulty in using mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization)	2.64	1.04	14	Neutral
I have difficulty in summarizing ideas taken from other sources.	2.58	0.98	15	Neutral
	Overall Mean= 2.80	SD= 0.99		Neutral

It is shown in the table that the average sample responses ranged between (2.90 as a maximum and 2.58 as a minimum) with standard deviation that ranged between (0.81 and 0.98). It could be seen that the respondents' most five writing difficulty encountered are the "difficulty in coming up a good thesis statement" (M=2.90, SD=0.81), "difficulty in developing thesis statement" (M=2.86, SD= 0.99) ranked the second. In addition, "difficulty in determining whether a quotation is required or not" (M= 2.85, SD=1.06) and "difficulty

in choosing the appropriate academic word" (M=2.85, SD= 1.14) got the same rank, while "difficulty in writing coherent paragraphs" (M=2.82, SD=0.88) got the fifth rank. All were in the "Neutral" level of difficulty. Lastly, the overall result (M=2.80, SD=0.99) showed that the level of the writing difficulty was in "Neutral" level.

IV. DISCUSSION

Writing capacity is not something given but must be obtained by process and the process itself should be

trained continuously. Because writing capacity is the result of the writing process and practice, it is important to consider the importance of learning for writing. It means that practice makes perfect is the right proverb to remember. As writing process to have the writing capacity, it is necessary to underline writing that is not only to put the words together in which writing is aimed to arrange the words into a phrase, sentences, and text, but it is also something enabling human intellect and capabilities to be visible. What is visible here deals with the ideas elaborated in words, phrases, and sentences in the text that should be understood by the readers. The text has meaning and goal. Every utterance in the text is developed to build the meaning based on the text and context. Every text is in line with the context so that the text can deliver the meaning and messages to the readers (Dooley, 1995).

This study assessed the writing difficulties of the Grade 10 learners in a public school in the Philippines. Using the adopted survey questionnaire of Dr. Shaban Aldabbus of the University of Bahrain and Ennaji Almansouri, a faculty of the University of Benghazi on their study Academic Writing Difficulties by University EFL Learners, it was found that the five most writing difficulties that learners encountered were the difficulty in coming up with good thesis statement, difficulty in developing thesis statement, difficulty in determining whether a quotation is required or not, difficulty in choosing the appropriate academic words, and difficulty in writing coherent paragraphs.

It is inferred that first two writing difficulties has shown how “coming up with good thesis statement” and “developing a good thesis statement” are interrelated, which means you can develop a good thesis statement unless you can come up a good one. This could be due to the lack of practice in coming up and developing a good thesis statement. Thesis statement is important before elaborating your ideas in a whole paragraph because it serves as the direction and focus of the content you will be including in your write-ups. This serves as the backbone of your essay. No wonder why learners find difficult in developing paragraphs in essay since coming up and developing a good one should anchor them to a strong base of writing. Firstly, the thesis statement establishes the purpose of a paper and sets up the author’s primary argument. This means that the thesis statement helps readers set expectations for the statements and supporting research to follow in the paper (McCombes, 2020). Secondly, by expressly stating the purpose of an essay or research paper, the

thesis also helps authors keep their writing focused. By identifying a clear research statement, authors and researchers can more easily organize and develop their arguments. Lastly, the thesis statement guides the reader through the main argument in a piece of writing. These sentences identify relationships between the pieces of evidence or research that support your argument. (Developing a Thesis Statement, n.d.)

The other reason that English language learners encountered is the “difficulty in determining whether a quotation is required or not.” Such quotations and attention grabbers capture the reader’s mind. Moreover, one may use statements made by famous leaders, politicians, academicians, or individuals they know (Norton, 2025). According to its definition, a quote is a direct repetition of someone else’s words with copied and pasted arguments, statements, or thoughts separated by quotation marks and acknowledged with its author(s). The main purpose of a quote is to simplify complex ideas, reinforce writer’s arguments, and provide authoritative support, enhancing the credibility of the overall content (Kaufman & Straus, 2021). They also engage readers or listeners and connect them to familiar ideas or notable voices, which can provoke a better response and thinking from the audience and maintain greater interest in a specific topic under discussion. One can use various types of quotes to begin an essay. With this, English teachers should impart formatting styles rely on different quoting rules, so learners will be provided a basis on how to cite quotations that would make their essay writing commendable.

Taking the time to find the right words offers writers a significant edge. Concise and appropriate terms will help both the writer, and the reader keep track of what the essay will show and how it will show it (Cook, 1985). However, learner may find difficult in choosing the appropriate words in essay. In Laufer and Nation's research (1995), a learner's vocabulary size may be seen in their effective language usage, such as writing. As reported by Nation (2001), L2 learners' academic written writing may receive higher scores if their academic vocabulary grows. Similarly, teachers' assessments of the work of non-native speaker students reveal that lexical mistakes are the most significant issue (Santos, 1988). Therefore, increasing academic vocabulary should help writers become better writers. In agreement with Zhou (2009), the main issue with my vocabulary is descriptive terms. Word choice was another difficulty for students (19% of comments on

vocabulary improvement were made in this area). They admitted having trouble deciding which term to use in a certain situation. Additionally, students struggled to identify and rectify these mistakes without the help of professors or native English speakers.

The use of language aspects or abilities in writing, such as punctuation, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, and other areas, is the fundamental factor that makes writing difficult. Pratiwi (2016) says that the pupils' struggles with writing in English may be caused by a lack of ideas, written tasks, and written vocabulary. Sulasti (2003) confirms that students' main issues with writing are how to write, what to write, a lack of vocabulary terms, and poor structure. A study by Zhou (2009) also found that the pupils' most difficult part was language use and vocabulary and there were still fundamental problems in their creation in terms of language use, such as organization, tense, quantity, word order/of fragments, deletion, and meaning that was unclear or concealed.

A study by Pratiwi (2016) indicates students' challenges in writing English related to language use. It indicates that students needed to increase their capacity to select the language relevant to their writing topic. Students struggled with their vocabulary; thus, they should practice writing in English to improve their vocabulary. Students should pay close attention to the tense, vocabulary, and punctuation. Brun-Mercer and Zimmerman (2015) find that encouraging students to use a learner's dictionary ensures that a term is acceptable for the target genre. One of the dictionaries that list academic terms and indicate the register (formal/slang/technical, etc.) is the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary.

Moreover, coherence is required for good academic writing. This component assists writers in logically and smoothly organizing their ideas. Furthermore, it makes it easier for the teacher to follow the writers' ideas in their writing. A coherent text can aid readers in understanding the writers' purpose and line of thought (Harmer, 2007). According to Odell and Hobbs (2001), when a paragraph has coherence, the ideas are arranged in a logical progression, or an order that makes sense so that the reader moves easily from one idea to another. As one of the important aspects to be concerned, coherence becomes one of students' difficulties in writing. In addition, students have not enough knowledge to distinguish which one is the main idea, and which one is just supporting idea.

Therefore, when they start writing they cannot deliver a clearly thought in every paragraph. Automatically, if this happens, our writing is not coherent certainly. Besides coherence, there is also other thing we have to notice, and it cannot be separated with coherence. It is called as cohesion. Both of them are the intangible glue that holds paragraphs together. Coherence makes every sentence flows smoothly and logically while cohesion makes every sentence sticks together by using cohesive devices. Kennedy (1998) stated that cohesion refers to the ways in which texts are, stuck together—the ways in which sentences are linked or connected by various linguistic and semantic ties. Furthermore, Clark (2006) distinguished between coherence and cohesion, when the big parts fit, we call that good feeling coherence; when the sentences connect, we call it cohesion. With this, we must emphasize to our learners the usage of cohesive devices and its functions to achieving coherence in essay paragraph writing.

As second language teachers, we have this optimum responsibility on how to help first to provide strong foundation of writing on our learners not only in developing a thesis statement before letting them sail into writing. We should make sure to provide writing practices and vocabulary enrichment activities, which would aid and improve their skill, so our learners will have a strong backbone in developing a good and effective paragraph development.

V. CONCLUSION

During their high school careers, most of our students were not writing with the frequency we might expect, nor were they doing the types of writing that we will require of them in their college years. In a study at George Washington University (2007), first-year undergraduates reported that the most frequently assigned high school writing tasks required them to offer and support opinions, with a secondary emphasis on summarizing and synthesizing information. Furthermore, according to a survey conducted by The Chronicle of Higher Education (2006), 61% of high school teachers said their students have never written a paper that was more than five pages. As a result, students have not had enough practice to develop a set of sophisticated writing skills. When students lack skills in these areas, their writing may be unsatisfactory in multiple ways – from poor grammar and syntax to unclear organization to weak reasoning and arguments.

The current study investigated the writing difficulties that learners encounter in writing classes or performances aligned to the learning competency in English 10 subject. The study utilized quantitative research approach. Survey questionnaire was being adopted in the study of Dr. Shaban Aldabbus of the University of Bahrain and Ennaji Almansouri, a faculty of the University of Benghazi, about Academic Writing Difficulties by University EFL Learners to assess the writing difficulties encountered by respondents. Out of fifteen survey questions, the finding revealed that learners have five most difficulties, and these are the difficulty in coming up with good thesis statement, difficulty in developing thesis statement, difficulty in determining whether a quotation is required or not, difficulty in choosing the appropriate academic words, and difficulty in writing coherent paragraphs. With these, it can be inferred that insufficient time in providing writing activities affects these writing problems. According to Hedge (1988), writing activities have discrete stages that require enough time. Students need time to arrange their thoughts, compose rough drafts, edit them, and then write the final versions.

According to Colions and Gethen (1980), a significant portion of writing is determined by several conditions that must be satisfied at several levels, including written content, paragraph format, structure of sentences, and word selection. They noted that organizing all these criteria is a tough task that requires time. In agreement with this, White and Arndt (1991) assert that time is essential for the formation of ideas. Similarly, Raimes (1983) thinks that time is an important component of writing method and a feature that sets it apart from speaking. Time can also play a significant role in generating a writing that is cohesive and coherent with complete control. Additionally, many students and teachers believe that writing under time constraints is not natural and incapable of producing quality writing (Kroll, 1990). This was strengthened according to many studies; writing is a challenging activity that necessitates the use of numerous linguistic components. Writing difficulties can be viewed as psychological, linguistic, and cognitive challenges, according to Byrne (1988). Grabe and Kaplan (1996) assert that writing is a complicated talent that requires constant work and extensive practice.

Also, this can be inferred due to the result of lack writing practice which was supported according to Davies (1998), writing is an artistic process, and authors should organize their thoughts coherently to capture the

reader's interest. It takes a lot of practice to do this. According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996), writing skills are developed through consistent effort and lots of practice. Additionally, learners must take ownership of their education for it to be effective. He also emphasizes that practicing a skill is the best way to learn it. Similarly, writing frequently is the best method to improve as a writer.

In turn, English teachers should accept this challenge faced by learners on how to elevate their writing skills by providing them a proper guidance, knowledge, background in making and developing a good and effective paragraph when not only in writing an essay, but also in forms of writing types.

Lastly, this study will be an eye opener for educators, innovators, and curriculum planner to intensify interventions in writing difficulties.

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