

## **Exploring Paragraph Writing Problems of Second Year EFL Students at Setif 2 University**

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### **Abstract:**

This study is an attempt to investigate the common problems encountered in paragraph writing by second-year students of English at Setif 2 University. A corpus study of 80 students' essays was employed to collect data using thematic and content analysis. Results showed that the major writing problem for learners was spelling followed by mechanics of writing, vocabulary and word choice, sentence structure, and grammatical errors including subject- verb agreement, verb tense and form, using prepositions, references use, and pronouns. One of the most recommendations that are proposed for written expression teachers is continuous assessment for the writing process along with the learners' academic career. Learners should be encouraged by their instructors to extensive writing practices.

**Keywords:** Extensive Writing, Paragraph Writing, Writing problems, continuous assessment

### **1. Introduction**

During their academic career, EFL learners are invited to enhance their learning skills so that they reach a good level of English language. One of the crucial skills that learners should develop from the very beginning of their EFL learning is writing. The latter represents the basis by which learners' progress is evaluated throughout different learning modules in exams and quizzes, and even after they finish their studies, written tests are also handed to

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candidates during academic contests such as magister and doctorate contests. Because of that, learners should better learn how to write to serve their academic purposes and job requirements. McMahan et al (2016), in the same vein, insist that the purpose of writing is infinite to embrace expressing feelings, entertaining, informing, and persuading readers. Additionally, written products should be well-developed and constructed as they serve different messages in both life and educational contexts.

Whenever they are asked to write, learners encounter writing problems. Learners fail to express themselves appropriately while writing paragraphs. Based on discussions with teachers of writing and written expression, learners' failure of producing good paragraphs is related to a set of problems as an efficient writing style is achieved with respect to writing mechanics, form, and content. Writing problems seem to be observed in constructing sentences and putting ideas. This rings the alarm for researchers to search accurately for the common problems in learners' writing, which is the main concern of the present probe. The ultimate aim of the current exploratory investigation is to explore the problems learners face while writing paragraphs, and more particularly by identifying the common errors committed in their written productions. In this respect, the following research questions are raised.

1. What writing problems might be encountered in Second-Year students' paragraph writing at Setif 2 University?
2. How do writing problems affect the quality of writing?

## **2. Writing Skill**

Writing is defined as a productive skill, comprehending cognitive processes (Jebreil et al, 2015), which consist of expressing intentions, composing ideas, problem-solving, and critical thinking (Fareed et al., 2016; Ginting, 2019). Besides, Cumming (1998, p.61) has put forward writing as more than the text in a written form itself; it is the process of thinking, composing, and encoding language into text. Writing thus, involves a set of different competencies (Brown, 2000, p.335) as it requires more efforts such as: understanding, thinking, planning, and revising. Driscoll & Powell ( 2016) suggest that students' emotions, interest in writing, anxiety, lack of self-efficacy play a vital role for the development of individual learning and learning how to write. The writing process according to Bailey

(2015), goes through several stages: (1) selecting suitable sources, (2) reading texts, (3) note-making, (4) planning and outlining, (5) combining variety of sources, (6) organizing paragraphs, and (7) rewriting and proof-reading in order to produce a well-organized manuscript.

## **2.1 Paragraph Writing**

A paragraph is a combination of connected sentences that work as one unit to support one main idea (Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Boardman & Frydenberg, 2002; Brandon & Brandon, 2011; and Connelly, 2013). The length of paragraphs is not limited to a number of sentences depending on the topic being discussed (Zemach & Rumisek, 2005 and Zemach & Islam, 2006). The first sentence, or the topic sentence is usually indented and the first word in this sentence is capitalized (Zemach & Rumisek, 2005). Paragraph organization is built through structural elements: Topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence (Oshima & Hogue, 2006; Boardman & Frydenberg, 2002; Brandon & Brandon, 2011; and Connelly, 2013). The topic sentence represents the main idea of the paragraph and involves the topic and controlling idea (key word) that controls the topic and provides an overall idea about what the writer intends to develop and tell in the rest of the paragraph. Supporting sentences represent details that support the topic sentence by explaining, exemplifying, stating facts statistics, details, and quotations that are organized logically and cohesively in order to convey a certain message or meaning. The last sentence in a paragraph is a concluding sentence that usually gives the reader a result, valuable suggestion or recommendation, or signals a link with the following paragraph. Unity and coherence are two characteristics that shape paragraph writing. Unity refers to how perfectly supporting sentences are related with others, and discusses only one main idea; whereas, coherence means logical and smoothly arrangement in the flow of ideas.

## **2.2 Identification of Common Writing Problems**

EFL learners are found to face difficulties in writing paragraphs. These difficulties create problems in learners' performance. Alfaki (2015), in his study, explored a set of linguistic problems which are commonly faced in writing compositions.

Linguistic problems are grammatical, mechanical, sentence structure, and diction problems. Another problem that can be added by Al Fada (2012) is language transfer. It is believed EFL learners think that sentences they produce in their mother tongue are transferred directly to the target language, which is the reason why they fail to produce good paragraphs. In this, Mohammad (2018) believes that the reason behind learners' errors is that English differs from Arabic in terms of language rules, patterns, and structures. That is, differences between Arabic and English affect negatively learners' achievement. Difficulties are best described and classified as follows:

### **2.2.1 Grammar**

Helping learners of English to improve their grammar is extremely important. One way to examine learners' grammar progress is through their writing production (Hajana, 2006). Grammar is a difficult and complex task that does not have easy solution (Abdulmajeed & Hameed, 2017). Grammatical difficulties are best categorized into "Misuse of tenses", "Subject-verb agreement", "Articles", "Word order", "Identifying sentence patterns", and "Identifying types of sentences".

### **2.2.2 Spelling**

Usually, spelling mistakes appear when learners lose focus on the word or ignorance of word correctness because of their concern about the finding the right word more than spelling the word itself (Bancha, 2013). The presentation of any writing production requires the organization of ideas into a unified written form. Because of the transfer of other languages, English spelling is a complex skill to master by learners of English. Arabic, as an independent rich language, owns its orthographical structures (spelling system) different from those of English language (Alenazi, 2018). Spelling problems can be classified into a) wrong spelling and b) confusing sounds and letters.

### **2.2.3 Punctuation**

Punctuation placement changes meaning. It is more important than spelling (Betham, 2011, p.37). It is punctuation that adds meaning to texts, and affects the meaning negatively if they are not

properly used. Harmer (2007) claims that learners, during their academic trip, are exposed more to punctuation and capitalization rules more than any other tasks. They rely on writing in almost all their learning subjects as they take notes. Learners, for Meyers (2006), write for the sake of knowledge and exams not for the sake of writing. The common punctuation errors can be classified as: "Misuse of capitalization", "Misuse of full stop", and "Misuse of commas".

#### **2.2.4 Handwriting**

Handwriting is one way to attract the reader to read more about what we are saying in paragraphs and essays. How we write can affect our style and attraction of people reading our work. That is why most students fail in their learning subjects even though they have great ideas. Good writing consists of shape, indentation, size style of letters, and spacing between words and sentences. Handwriting problems can be classified as: "Missing spaces", "Letters are written incorrectly" and "Style of letters".

### **3. Research Design and Data Collection Procedures**

The current investigation took place in the Department of English Language and Literature at Setif 2 University. It is an exploratory study to explore second-year EFL students' paragraph writing problems. A corpus of 80 essays was employed as a research instrument in this study. Students were given a topic that deals with up- to-date issues to make them express their ideas freely. The participants were asked to write a paragraph of 200 words discussing the following topic: Talk about "How Covid 19 changed my life". Exploring students' problems in writing was achieved through corpus analysis. Students' paragraphs were read one by one, and writing errors were detected by the researcher and two experienced writing teachers, who work in the same context. Once error detection was completed, errors were classified and coded according to their occurrence and their types in the paragraphs.

### **4. Results and Discussion of the Findings**

A thorough description of paragraph writing problems was provided though discussing each type of error committed by students with extracts taken from the present study corpora. First, writing errors were counted and then classified according to their occurrence

in students' production. Each type of error was presented separately below. Errors committed by learners were ranked from the most frequent to the least ones. Results of data analysis revealed that the most frequent error is spelling followed by handwriting, mechanics of writing, vocabulary and collocation use, sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, reference use, verb tense, verb form, preposition, and pronouns.

#### 4.1 Spelling and Handwriting Errors

The spelling of words was found as a challenging matter by students. This was observed in their production as learners add or omit a letter from a particular word. Therefore, spelling errors are discussed and explained into two categories: omitting a letter(s) or adding a letter. Handwriting errors were also analyzed with spelling errors. This is shown in Table 01 below.

**Table1. Spelling and Handwriting Errors Occurrence in Students' Writing**

	Frequency and Occurrence in Paragraphs	Percentage
Absence of a Letter( s) in Particular Word	73	91.25 %
learners' Adding a Letter(s) in a Single Word	70	87.5%
Missing Space between Two Words	60	75%

Source: Table Designed by the Researcher for the Sake of Analysis

As it is indicated in Table 01, learners' omitting of a letter in words was the most frequent spelling error (91.25 %) followed by learners' adding letter(s) to certain words (87.5%). Missing space between two separate words is also repeatedly committed by learners (75%). Extracts of errors are taken from samples of paragraphs below.

##### **a)The Absence of a Letter( s) in a Particular Word:**

*intrests = interests*

*nowaday = nowadays*

*depressin= depression*

*I am setting at home= I am seating at home*

*I may go out to by the medicals= I may go out to buy the medicals*

*recipes= recipies*

*authories= authorities*

*everythin = everything*

#### **b) Learners' insertion of an extra letter to certain words**

• *Corona virus changed many thinks in my life=*  
*Corona virus changed many **things** in my life*

• *I used to visit my grandfather onece a week*  
*I used to visit my grandfather **once** a week*

*economie= economy*

*guitare = guitar*

#### **c) Missing space**

*samething= same thing*

*forme , I think that corona virus .... =*

*for me , corona virus .....*

### **4.2 Mechanics of Writing**

**Table2. Mechanics of Writing Errors in Students' Paragraphs**

	Frequency and Occurrence in Paragraphs	Percentage
a. Misuse of Capitalization	58	72.5%
b. Misuse of Full Stop	56	70%
c. Misuse of Comma	50	62.5%
d. Misuse of Colons and Semi-colons	45	56.25%
e. Absence of Punctuation	42	52.5%

Source: Table Designed by the Researcher for the Sake of Analysis

Another problem that can be treated in writing paragraphs is punctuation. As it appears in the results from Table 02, and in examining the mechanics of writing, 5 five punctuation errors were detected and categorized as misuse of punctuation (72.5%), misuse of a full stop (70%), misuse of comma (62.5%), misuse of colons and semi-colons (56.25%), and absence of punctuation (52.5%). Punctuation errors are systematically explained below.

#### **a) Misuse of Capitalization**

The following sentence is an example from one of the students' paragraphs. As it can be noticed, capitalization is used randomly. The

pronoun “we” should be capitalized, but it is not. “But” and “Home” should not be capitalized.

*we used to visit our relatives, But because of covid -19 we are obliged to stay at Home and not go even to The university=*

*We used to visit our relatives, but because of Covid -19, we are obliged to stay at home and not go even to University.*

#### **b) Misuse of full Stop**

The following sentence seems well structured, but in fact this sentence is the first sentence in a paragraph that begins with a full stop instead of an indentation.

*. The corona virus, the global pandemic that changed ..... =*

*The corona virus, the global pandemic that changed .....*

#### **c) Misuse of Comma**

In English grammar, using a comma to separate two independent clauses is unacceptable and faulty. The following sentence should be revised, and appropriate punctuation should be added. Replacing the second comma with a period will solve the problem.

*They were so fun, but now we can't do so anymore, we weren't able to go out for 6 months.*

*They were so fun, but now we can't do so anymore. We weren't able to go out for 6 months.*

#### **d) Misuse of Colons and Semi-Colons (;)**

Semicolons are not employed after a subordinating conjunction introducing a sentence. In the following sentence, a semi-colon is used where a comma is required instead. Replacing the semi-colon with a comma solves the problem.

*In addition to that; it has affected me emotionally like: depression, fear of virus.*

*= In addition to that, it has affected me emotionally like depression and fear of virus.*

In the following sentence, a colon was placed after a subordinating conjunction. Omitting the colon is a right decision to correct the error.

*I was scared and upset as: wondering in myself*

*=I was scared and upset as wondering in myself*

Joining two independent clauses with a Colon (:) is also an error that the majority of EFL writers are not aware of. One easy way to correct this error is to replace the colon with a full stop (.).



*the government has taken many decisions: I spent all the time at home...*

*The government has taken many decisions. I spent all the time at home...*

#### e) **Missing Punctuation**

Another error that can be detected while analyzing learners' paragraphs is joining two independent clauses without any punctuation. The majority of learners keep writing, forgetting all about punctuation. The following long sentence has two independent ideas, joined as one single idea. Dividing the sentence into two sentences using a full stop is one effective way to revise punctuation.

*The corona virus has changed how we work, play and learn schools are closing and many people have been asked to work from home.*

*=The corona virus has changed how we work, play, and learn. Schools are closing and many people have been asked to work from home.*

### 4.3 Vocabulary and Word Choice

**Table3. Vocabulary and Word Choice Errors in Students' Writing**

	Frequency and Occurrence in Paragraphs	Percentage
Literal Translation of Arabic Collocation and Words	40	50%
Word Choice and Vocabulary	37	46.25%

Source: Table Designed by the Researcher for the Sake of Analysis

Vocabulary errors, word choice, and Arabic thinking are also worth of discussion. They are explained and explained in two categories: literal translation of Arabic collocations, and vocabulary and word choice. As it is shown in table 03, errors related to literal translation occurred more frequently (50%) followed by word choice and collocation errors (46.25%). The following are samples of errors taken from learners paragraphs:

#### A) **Literal Translation of Arabic Collocation and Words**

- *Since it entered our lives, it has become threatened with death.*
- *This disease has left its mark in the societies.*
- *No one in the family was infected with this virus again.*
- *I don't get out only for the necessity*

## B) Word Choice and Vocabulary

- *To sum up, corona was considered as a realistic lesson.....and **learns** me the value of life.*  
*To sum up, corona was considered as a realistic lesson.....and **teaches** me the value of life.*
- *Like wearing muzzles= like wearing **masks***
- *in order to survive my life and other lives*  
*= in order to **save/protect** my life and other lives*
- *I must follow the instructions to fight this serious illness=*  
*I must follow the instructions to **overcome** or/ **defeat** this serious illness*
- *I became good cooker= I became good **cook***
- *satying at home that long 7 months=*  
*staying at home for **more than 7 month***
- *we got back to our lives= we **came back** to our lives*

## 4.4 Sentence Structure

Sentence structure is extremely important in writing because it is one way to connect ideas, and maintain cohesion and coherence. Errors committed in learners' paragraphs affected negatively the flow of ideas that resulted failure in producing cohesive and coherent paragraphs. Sentence structure errors are described in two categories: Faulty coordination (**41.25%**), and faulty subordination (**37.5%**).

**Table 04.Sentence Structure Errors in Students' Writing Paragraph**

	Occurrence and Frequency	Percentage
Faulty Coordination	33	41.25%
Faulty Subordination	30	37.5%

Source: Table Designed by the Researcher for the Sake of Analysis

### a) Faulty coordination

Faulty coordination occurs when it is illogical or inappropriate to assign equal importance to two or more coordinate clauses, when the connecting word fails to create a reasonable relationship between the clauses creating **faulty coordination**, or when sentences are combined using "all-purpose" conjunctions such as "**And**" or "**So**" leading to a rambling long sentence that contains too many independent clauses or the so called excessive coordination.

*I terrified of the fact that I may lose them because of the pandemic, **and** I think corona virus had increased a lot, **and** I have to mention that all web sites are .....*

*= I am terrified of the fact that I may lose them because of the pandemic **that** has increased. I have to mention that all web sites are .....*

Absence of coordinating conjunction to join two independent clauses or using comma to connect two sentences is also faulty and unacceptable .The following sentences are two independent clauses joined by a comma. One way to correct this error is to restructure them into one simple sentence.

*I used to visit all my family members, I used to visit my grandparents.*

*I used to visit all my family members, **and** my grandparents.*

#### **a) Faulty subordination**

Faulty subordination occurs when the more important clause is placed in a subordinate position in the sentence, or when the expected relation between two or more clauses is reversed creating faulty subordination, or when too many details are added to the main clause. In the following sentence, the learner failed to create expected relations between clauses. In order to solve this problem, one can break up the sentence into two sentences. The learner joined the main clause with the second clause with a wrong conjunction “but” where there is no contrast relation between the two clauses. In the last two clauses, “because” can be added instead of “otherwise” to correct the error.

*Covid-19 has changed me, but it is not all bad, otherwise it has a bright side.*

*Covid-19 has changed me. It is not all bad because it has a bright side*

Misuse of conjunctions and subordinating conjunctions in the following example taken from learners’ paragraphs can be detected in the following sentence. The learner used the coordinating conjunction “and” with “Although” in the subordinate clause, and “yet” was Used in the main clause which is faulty. The sentence is corrected as follows:

***And although**, it is very dangerous, **yet** people still take risks*

***Although**, it is very dangerous, people still take risks.*

#### 4.5 Subject Verb- Agreement

**Table 05. Subject Verb -Agreement Errors Occurrence in Students' Writing**

	Frequency and Occurrence in Paragraphs	percentage
Subject- Verb Agreement	15	18.75%

Source: Table Designed by the Researcher for the Sake of Analysis

Subject- verb agreement errors are a common grammatical problem that was also noticed while analyzing learners' paragraphs. 18.75% of errors were detected. These errors are mostly related to verb form such as omitting the "S" of third person singular with "she", "he", "it", or adding the "S" with "they", "we", "I", and "you" as it appears in the following examples:

*but it help to reduce this phenomenon=*

*but it helps to reduce this phenomenon.*

*Elderly, who suffering from chronic disease, also suffer....*

*Elderly, who are **suffering** from chronic disease, also suffer...*

*The corona virus change my life in so many ways=*

*The corona virus **changes** my life in so many ways*

*There **is** spaces between ... =*

*There **are** spaces between*

#### 4.6 Reference

**Table6. Reference Errors Occurrence in Students' Writing**

	Frequency and Occurrence in Paragraphs	Percentage
Misuse of Reference	9	11.25%

Source: Table Designed by the Researcher for the Sake of Analysis

Misuse of references is related to learners' lack of knowledge about grammar rules of subject verb agreement. 11.25% of errors are related to misuse of references as it appears in the following sentences extracted from learners' paragraphs:

*We should protect **yourself** and others from infection...*

*We should protect **ourselves** and others from infection...*

*After this bad results= after these bad results*

*Corona virus **its** dangerous, because **its** killed many people*

*Corona virus **is** dangerous, because **it** killed many people.*

***Corona virus** is very dangerous virus, **he** started in Algeria in February.*

***Corona virus** is very dangerous virus. **It** started in Algeria in February.*

#### 4.7 Verb Tense

**Table. Verb tense Errors Occurrence in Students' Writing**

	Frequency and Occurrence in Paragraphs	Percentage
Misuse of Tenses	7	8.75%

Source: Table Designed by the Researcher for the Sake of Analysis

Another grammatical problem that can be observed in learners' paragraphs is incorrect use of verb tenses (8.75%). It involves learners' using the wrong tense to express a particular tense. For example using the past perfect instead of present perfect as it appears in the following sentence:

*I used to visit my grandfather once a week, but due to pandemic I **hadn't seen** him for months*

*I used to visit my grandfather once a week, but due to pandemic I **haven't seen** him for months.*

or the future tense instead of present perfect as it is expressed below :

*But scientists **would not find** vaccination to this disease till now.*

*But scientists **have not found** vaccination to this disease till now.*

#### 4.8 Verb Form

**Table8. Verb form Errors Occurrence in Students' Writing**

	Frequency and Occurrence in Paragraphs	Percentage
Verb Form	5	6.25%

Source: Table Designed by the Researcher for the Sake of Analysis

The results in table 08 entail that 6.25% of verb form errors can be detected in learners' writing. This is best described in the following instances:

In the following sentence, the writer used the base form “**start**” to indicate the past tense , which is grammatically incorrect . An “**ed**” should be added accordingly.

*But now we start our courses at University=*

*but now we started our courses at University*

*I scared of the disease, so keep at home in order avoiding injury.=*

*I **am scared** of the disease, so keep at home in order avoiding injury.*

*I **terrified** of the fact that I may lose them.=*

*I am terrified of the fact that I may lose them.*

#### 4.9 Prepositions

**Table9. Preposition Errors Occurrence in Students' Writing**

	Frequency and Occurrence in Paragraphs	Percentage
Prepositions	4	5%

Source: Table Designed by the Researcher for the Sake of Analysis

Omission of prepositions, addition of prepositions, and misuse of prepositions are common errors that most of EFL learners commit while using English. The following is an example of omission of preposition:

*But thanks a God, they were cured =*

*But thanks to God, they were cured*

#### 4.10 Pronouns

**Table10. Pronoun Errors Occurrence in Students' Writing**

	Frequency and Occurrence in Paragraphs	Percentage
Misuse of Pronouns	04	5%

Source: Table Designed by the Researcher for the Sake of Analysis

While reading learners' paragraphs, the researcher observed misuse of pronouns ( 5%).As it appears in the following sentence, **the**

**personal pronoun “me”** is employed instead of reflexive pronoun **“myself”**.

*I tried to protect **me** by wearing masks=*

*I tried to protect **myself** by wearing masks*

## 5. Conclusion

This paper attempted to investigate paragraph writing problems of second-year learners of English at “Setif 2” University. The findings of the current investigation revealed that a variety of writing problems, related to grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary confront learners from good writing compositions. The present study showed us how writing problems affected negatively the quality of writing and communicating ideas. The most frequent writing error that was committed by learners is the spelling of words. Learners did not pay attention to word spelling as they repeatedly misspelled most of the words by omitting, adding letters to words, and in other cases by omitting space between two separate words. Also, the mechanics of writing was found to be a difficult matter to master in English because, at this level, the learners create relations between ideas and sentences. In addition, the placement of punctuation shapes meaning, and one should focus on it in any piece of writing.

Not surprisingly, grammatical problems such as subject-verb agreement, verb form and use, pronouns use, reference, and preposition use were more frequent in learners’ paragraphs. Thus, it is of paramount importance to treat grammar carefully and cautiously by both teachers and learners. Moreover, Word choice and vocabulary are two crucial skills for learners as it is words that communicate meanings and convey messages, and any mistake in selecting the appropriate vocabulary affects the whole meaning. It was observed while reading learners’ paragraphs, that they think in Arabic and use English words to express their ideas. Mostly, they even keep translating word-by-word Arabic collocations, and follow the same word order, which does not serve their writing purposes. Learners’ exposure to the target language should be continuous to train themselves on what word to use, and when to use it. Furthermore, structuring sentences using appropriate connectors (coordinating conjunctions & subordinating conjunctions) failed the majority of students. This failure affected negatively their writing. Hence, more activities on how to structure sentences have to be provided by written

expression teachers through the extension of teaching hours devoted to sentence structure.

It was expected, throughout this study, to raise learners' awareness about the importance of grammar, mechanics of writing, vocabulary and word choice, and spelling in paragraph writing as any failure in one of these writing skills means failure in conveying messages and meanings. Besides, attracting the reader to read more about one's topic requires the writer's mastery of all the writing skills and revision of the errors through steps of writing that any writer has to take cautiously into consideration while writing. Thus, the students have to follow all the steps of writing such as pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing.

In light of the study findings, teachers are urgently called to raise learners' awareness about the problems that they might confront while writing as they should bring samples of pieces of writing with errors to be analyzed and revised. The teacher can invite the learners to read these samples, try to identify the problems, and self-correct them, and the teacher's role in this case is a guide and a moderator in the classroom. Teacher's feedback is also important and should be given to the learners immediately. Without forgetting teachers of other modules, assessment of the writing skill should not be the responsibility of the written expression teachers solely, but rather learners writing must be assessed continuously throughout different modules along their academic career. Hopefully, this research is a call for syllabus designers and decision-makers to reconsider teaching methods in written expression for the improvement of English writing.

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