

Paragraph Writing Barriers: A Study on The Fifth-Semester of English Department Students

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Abstract

Writing paragraphs in English is a fundamental academic skill, yet many students still encounter various difficulties, particularly in the digital era where technology influences writing practices. This study aimed to identify the barriers faced by fifth-semester students in paragraph writing and examine the factors influencing their writing, including the role of digital technology. This research employed a descriptive qualitative design. The participants were fifth-semester students of the English Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Bengkulu. The data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. The findings revealed that students experienced linguistic, cognitive, technical, and technological barriers. Linguistic barriers were the most dominant, particularly in vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. Other difficulties included cohesion, mechanics, organization, and coherence. In addition, digital technology acted as both a supporting and influencing factor. While digital tools helped students correct errors and generate ideas, excessive reliance on these tools reduced students' confidence and independent writing ability. In conclusion, vocabulary and grammar limitations remain the primary barriers, and digital technology significantly influences students' paragraph writing both positively and negatively.

Keywords: paragraph, paragraph writing, writing barriers.

INTRODUCTION

English has become an international language that plays an essential role in education, science, technology, economics, and global communication. As a lingua franca, English is widely used to facilitate communication among people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, mastering English has become an important necessity, particularly for students and individuals in academic environments. In Indonesia, English is learned as a foreign language (EFL), where learners have limited opportunities to use English in their daily communication. Consequently, EFL learners often face challenges in developing English proficiency because the surrounding environment does not fully support the natural and continuous use of the language (Abu Ayfah, 2020).

Among the four language skills, writing is considered one of the most difficult skills to master. Writing is not merely the activity of arranging words into sentences but also a complex cognitive process that requires learners to generate ideas, organize information, and express thoughts systematically.

Good writing skills reflect students' understanding of the content and demonstrate their critical thinking and logical reasoning abilities. One of the fundamental aspects of writing is paragraph writing, which requires students to develop a single main idea supported by relevant and well-organized supporting

sentences.

Paragraph writing plays an important role in academic contexts because it serves as the foundation for producing longer academic texts, such as essays, reports, and scientific articles. However, many university students still encounter difficulties in constructing effective English paragraphs. These difficulties include limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, spelling problems, difficulties in developing ideas, and weaknesses in maintaining coherence and cohesion (Alkhasanah & Kholis, 2024). Such challenges often affect the quality of students' academic writing and hinder their ability to communicate ideas effectively.

The development of digital technology has significantly influenced students' writing practices. Various digital tools, such as Grammarly, QuillBot, and ChatGPT, provide assistance in correcting grammar, improving sentence structure, and generating ideas. Previous studies have shown that digital technology can improve students' writing quality and help them write more effectively (Khonirin & Roslaini, 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2024). However, excessive dependence on these technologies may reduce students' critical thinking and independent writing abilities because students tend to rely on automatic corrections rather than understanding their own mistakes (Fan, 2023; Selan Dakhi et al., 2024). Although previous studies have investigated students' writing difficulties and the use of digital technology in language learning, limited studies have specifically examined the barriers encountered by university students in writing English paragraphs and how digital technology influences these barriers in the digital era.

This phenomenon is also evident among fifth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Bengkulu.

Although these students have completed several writing courses and are expected to possess adequate academic writing skills, many of them still experience difficulties in vocabulary use, grammar, spelling, idea development, and paragraph organization when writing English paragraphs. Therefore, this study aims to identify the barriers faced by fifth-semester students in writing English paragraphs and to explore the factors influencing these barriers, including the role of digital technology in their writing process.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to identify and describe the barriers faced by fifth-semester students in writing English paragraphs and to explore the factors influencing these barriers in the digital era. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research aims to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem in natural settings.

The study was conducted at the English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Bengkulu, from November to December 2025. The participants of this study were fifth-semester students of the English Education Study Program in the academic year 2025/2026. The participants were selected through purposive sampling because they had completed several writing courses and were expected to possess adequate experience in academic writing, particularly paragraph writing.

The data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was used to identify the barriers encountered by students in writing English paragraphs, while the interviews were conducted to

obtain more comprehensive information regarding the factors causing those barriers and the influence of digital technology on students' writing processes.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. First, the researcher organized and reduced the data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews. Then, the data were categorized and displayed according to the themes related to paragraph-writing barriers and the factors influencing these barriers. Finally, conclusions were drawn to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced by fifth-semester students in writing English paragraphs and the influence of digital technology on their writing practices.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

FINDINGS

In the context of paragraph writing among EFL students, various barriers were identified during the writing process. Based on the questionnaire and interview data, the findings revealed that fifth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Bengkulu experienced several challenges in producing effective English paragraphs. These barriers emerged from linguistic, cognitive, technical, and technology-related factors. The findings further indicated that students' difficulties were interconnected, meaning that one barrier often influenced the occurrence of other barriers during the writing process.

Vocabulary Limitation

The findings showed that vocabulary limitation became the most dominant barrier experienced by the students. Most participants admitted that they had difficulty selecting appropriate words and expressing their ideas accurately in English. Students frequently needed additional time to search for suitable vocabulary before beginning to write, and some of them relied heavily on dictionaries, online translators, and digital applications to complete their writing tasks.

Interview data revealed that many students understood the ideas they wanted to convey but lacked sufficient vocabulary to transform those ideas into well-developed English sentences. As a result, students often simplified their arguments, avoided using academic expressions, and repeatedly used the same words throughout their paragraphs. This condition reduced the effectiveness and quality of their writing because ideas could not be expressed comprehensively and precisely.

Furthermore, limited vocabulary knowledge affected students' confidence during writing activities. Several participants stated that they hesitated to write longer paragraphs because they were afraid of using inappropriate words or making lexical errors. Consequently, vocabulary limitation became the primary obstacle that hindered students from producing effective academic paragraphs.

Grammar Difficulties

The second major finding was related to grammar. The questionnaire and interview results indicated that students experienced difficulties in applying correct sentence structures, verb forms, tense consistency, subject-verb agreement, and sentence patterns. Grammar was considered one of the most challenging aspects of writing because students frequently felt uncertain about whether their sentences were grammatically correct.

Several students reported that they spent considerable time checking and revising grammatical forms before continuing to the next sentence. Instead of focusing on generating and developing ideas, they became preoccupied with avoiding grammatical mistakes. As a consequence, the writing process became slower and less productive.

Interview findings also showed that students tended to translate sentences directly from Indonesian into English. This practice often resulted in incorrect sentence patterns and grammatical inaccuracies because the structures of Indonesian and English differ significantly. Therefore, grammatical difficulties not only affected language accuracy but also influenced students' confidence and writing fluency.

Difficulties in Cohesion and Coherence

Another important finding revealed that students encountered difficulties in maintaining cohesion and coherence within their paragraphs. Many students experienced problems connecting one sentence to another and organizing ideas systematically. They found it difficult to use transition signals appropriately and to create logical relationships between supporting ideas. The interview data demonstrated that students frequently wrote sentences individually without considering how those sentences related to one another. Consequently, many paragraphs lacked unity and appeared fragmented. Topic sentences were often not followed by sufficient explanations or relevant supporting details, causing readers to have difficulty understanding the intended message.

Several participants also admitted that maintaining coherence became increasingly difficult when writing longer paragraphs because they often lost focus on the main topic. These findings suggest that students still need to improve their understanding of paragraph structure and idea organization.

Idea Development and Paragraph Organization

The findings further demonstrated that students experienced barriers in generating and developing ideas. Many participants stated that they did not know how to elaborate their main ideas into supporting explanations, examples, or evidence after writing the topic sentence. As a result, many paragraphs appeared underdeveloped and lacked sufficient information. Students also encountered difficulties in organizing ideas into a well-structured paragraph. They struggled to arrange the introduction, supporting details, and concluding sentences logically. Several students admitted that they often started writing without making an outline or planning the content beforehand, which caused them to lose focus during the writing process.

The inability to develop and organize ideas significantly affected the overall quality of students' writing because paragraphs became unclear,

incomplete, and less effective in communicating meaning.

Technical Problems in Writing

The findings also identified several technical problems, including difficulties related to spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Students occasionally misspelled words and paid little attention to writing conventions. Although these errors occurred less frequently than vocabulary and grammar problems, they still affected the readability and professionalism of the written paragraphs.

Some participants explained that they depended on digital applications to identify and correct these errors. Consequently, when writing without technological assistance, they felt less confident in their ability to produce accurate written texts independently.

The Role of Digital Technology in Writing Activities

The findings further revealed that digital technology had become an inseparable part of students' writing practices. Most participants frequently used applications such as Grammarly, Google Translate, QuillBot, and ChatGPT to check grammar, translate vocabulary, revise sentences, and generate ideas.

Students perceived technology as beneficial because it accelerated the writing process, improved language accuracy, and reduced surface-level errors. Digital tools also helped students overcome vocabulary limitations and provided alternative expressions that facilitated idea development.

However, the interview findings also indicated that excessive dependence on technology created new challenges. Several students admitted becoming less confident when writing independently because they relied heavily on automated corrections and instant suggestions. Some participants stated that they tended to accept corrections provided by digital tools without fully understanding the reasons behind those corrections.

Overall, the findings indicate that digital technology plays a dual role in students' writing activities. While technology provides valuable support in improving writing performance, excessive dependence on these tools may hinder the development of independent writing competence and reduce students' ability to solve writing problems autonomously.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that grammatical difficulties remain one of the major barriers faced by EFL students in writing English paragraphs. This finding supports the study of Al Fadda (2019), which reported that grammar is one of the most challenging aspects of academic writing for EFL learners. Weak grammatical competence makes it difficult for students to express ideas accurately and effectively.

Vocabulary limitation was also identified as a significant barrier. This finding is consistent with Hyland and Jiang (2017), who argue that academic vocabulary plays an essential role in determining writing quality. Limited vocabulary knowledge restricts students' ability to communicate ideas clearly and develop more sophisticated paragraphs.

The findings related to coherence and cohesion support the argument of Oshima and Hogue (2017), who state that effective paragraphs require logical relationships among sentences and clear transitions between ideas.

Students' inability to maintain coherence and cohesion resulted in paragraphs that were difficult to understand and lacked unity.

The present study also found that students experienced difficulties in developing and organizing ideas. This finding is in line with the study conducted by Sari, Inayah, and Sutami (2022), which reported that idea development and content organization were among the most dominant difficulties experienced by EFL students in writing argumentative essays.

Moreover, affective factors such as low confidence, lack of motivation, and writing anxiety significantly influenced students' writing performance. This result supports Cheng's (2017) finding that writing anxiety negatively affects students' ability to generate ideas and maintain focus during the writing process.

Finally, the findings demonstrated that although digital technologies provide assistance in correcting language errors, they cannot replace students' critical thinking and independent writing abilities. This result is consistent with the findings of Andika, Sari, and Rahmawati (2025), who reported that AI-based writing tools improve grammatical accuracy but have limited effects on idea development and critical thinking skills. Therefore, students need to balance the use of digital technology with the development of independent writing strategies and critical thinking abilities in order to produce effective academic paragraphs.

CONCLUSION AND SUGESTIONS

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the barriers encountered by fifth-semester students of the English Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Bengkulu in writing English paragraphs in the digital era and examined the influence of digital technology on their writing practices.

The findings revealed that students experienced various barriers that could be categorized into linguistic, cognitive, technical, and technological aspects. Among these barriers, linguistic problems were the most dominant. Vocabulary emerged as the most frequent barrier, followed by grammar and spelling difficulties. Additional problems were identified in cohesion, mechanics, organization, and coherence. These findings indicate that limited vocabulary mastery and grammatical inaccuracy remain the major obstacles to producing academically appropriate paragraphs.

The study also found that digital technology plays a dual role in students' writing practices. Applications such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Google Translate provide immediate support in correcting errors, selecting vocabulary, and generating ideas. However, excessive reliance on these tools may reduce students' confidence and limit the development of independent writing competence.

In conclusion, vocabulary limitation constitutes the most significant barrier in students' paragraph writing, followed by grammatical and spelling difficulties. Although digital technology offers practical assistance, sustainable

improvement in academic writing requires a balanced use of technology combined with the development of independent linguistic competence and effective writing strategies.

SUGESSTIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions are proposed. First, English lecturers are encouraged to provide more intensive instruction and continuous practice in paragraph writing, with particular emphasis on paragraph organization, grammar, vocabulary development, and the use of cohesive devices. Constructive feedback should also be provided regularly to help students recognize and correct their writing errors. Second, students are expected to improve their paragraph writing skills by engaging in consistent writing practice, expanding their vocabulary, reviewing grammatical rules, and reading various academic texts to become familiar with effective paragraph structures. Seeking feedback from lecturers and peers can also contribute to the improvement of their writing ability.

Finally, future researchers are encouraged to investigate paragraph writing barriers using a larger and more diverse sample from different universities or educational contexts. They may also explore additional factors influencing students' writing performance, such as writing anxiety, motivation, learning strategies, and the effectiveness of instructional methods. Furthermore, future studies may employ mixed-method or experimental research designs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' paragraph writing barriers and to evaluate strategies for overcoming them.

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