An Exploration of Bachelor Level Learners' Experiences in Writing Paragraphs

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Abstract

An exploration of Bachelor's level learners' experiences in writing paragraphs aims to investigate how the learners are learning to write paragraphs from their school to university level in the English language. As a university teacher, the author observed his learners often writing less organized paragraphs, and preferred points rather than paragraphs in their assignments and other writing products as well. To explore the curiosity about how the learners are experiencing writing paragraphs, a narrative inquiry was conducted from five purposively selected Bachelor level participants from Surkhet Multiple Campus. Being a teacher, at one level, he informally gathered information on how they experienced writing paragraphs. By taking their oral consent from the informal talk, he managed to take a formal focused interview with the use of guidelines. During the interview, the audio recording was done which was then transcribed. After that, the codes were developed and followed by the categories. Lastly, three main themes were developed as the form of result: the learners felt the input that they got was more focused on writing points rather than a paragraph which encouraged them to write more in points than a paragraph. They also experienced a lack of sufficient input and feedback from teachers during their school as well as college-level learning classes. Similarly, unfamiliarity and overgeneralization were the other forms of experiences in their writing tasks. The article concludes that it needs to provide explicit input not only at the school level but also at university level learners for an organized paragraph to be formed.

Keywords: Paragraph, Experience, Unfamiliarity, Insight, Input

Context

As a teacher teaching Bachelor's level students at Tribhuvan University, Nepal, I have experienced a common statement from my students, 'sir! Paragraph change?' 'Is it a change of paragraph, sir?' 'Sir, is it the next paragraph?' 'Sir, did you say to change paragraph?' As they are writing something that I dictate in the classroom discussion. It has been a decade more, I often come across similar kinds of confirmation queries while involving the learners in writing tasks. Even in the assignments and exam answer sheets, I found points-based answers more often and a few paragraphs that are still less organized.

Generally, learners are supposed to be more independent in learning at the university level, they are expected to be more formal and academic in their writing. But being a teacher at the university level, I have observed that most of the learners are not producing well-organized paragraphs in their writing assignments and even in exam papers. Although academic writing introductory units are kept in Bachelor level courses at Tribhuvan University, Nepal with the expectation of developing basic knowledge and skill in academic writing, learners are not found good enough at writing tasks, especially in organizing

paragraphs. A similar situation is stated by (Shahhoseiny, 2015) many students in universities of Iran have problems with paragraph writing.

Although it is obvious that a paragraph is a basic unit of any written discourse to be constructed, very few written tasks are found in well-organized paragraphs. A paragraph is the combination of two or more sentences. It works as the foundation of any writing discourse. In all kinds of writing especially, in academic writing as mentioned by Kartawijaya (2018) a good paragraph is a prerequisite: the basic unit of organization in writing. To this point Oshima and Hogue (2007) mentioned, a complete paragraph should have three parts: a topic sentence, several supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence.

Since paragraph is a basic unit for any academic writing (Andrade & Evans, 2015) as cited in (Tran, 2021,p. 4) there are self-regulated learning strategies in writing academic papers with six dimensions: the first dimension is motive: learners get motivated on their own to get through challenging tasks. The second is the method: learners deploy different strategies, techniques, and methods to complete the tasks. The third dimension is time: learners prioritize and split time reasonably into each task. The fourth is performance: learners self-analyze their learning progress to have better performance. The fifth is the physical environment: learners are aware of getting distracted by exterior and interior factors, and the sixth one is the social environment: learners search for aids from a variety of resources to facilitate learning.

There are some other strategies that can be used in writing, one of them is the outline strategy (Kartawijaya, 2018). This is the strategy in which the students plan or make the design of their own writing what to do before starting to write, and what more activity can be done after getting the first draft. To improve their skill, they think about the content, they become careful about the organization of the content, they choose vocabulary wisely, and seriously go through the punctuations in their writing.

Very similar to the above is suggested by (Arini, 2016) as the footstep strategy to follow step by step from the start to the finish. The writers move forward in writing as the 'footsteps,' beginning to think about the writing content is the first step. Likewise, the collection of information is another step. Similarly, editing is the next step and ending functions as the final step of the writing journey. There are many more writing steps that can be followed from the start to the finishing step of paragraph writing.

Although there are various strategies that need to be implemented in producing a good paragraph, from the observation and the study of literature, I was curious to what extent the learners are aware of those techniques. As a result, how familiar they are to organize a good enough academic paragraph production. On the other hand, very little research has been done to explore the learners' experiences in writing paragraphs which shows the unawareness of learning to write paragraphs. Similarly, not much research has been done on what level of learners got input in writing a paragraph, what they do while writing, and also what they do after writing a paragraph. It created a kind of curiosity about whether the learners are using similar strategies or different. Another interesting point is what strategy is most common among the learners that most of the learners are using and which one is the least used by the learners. Likewise, the learners often doubt about changing paragraphs while writing any longer texts, they ask where to change the paragraph. It can be inferred that they are not good at designing a complete paragraph. The poorness of learners in writing a good paragraph means their unawareness of the writing strategies which the researcher wants to emphasize as well as encourages them to identify and practice writing a good paragraph.

Very often, the school-level course is providing insights into paragraph writing and the university level demands an academic style of the written product. I observed the situation and developed insights curiously into how the learners are experiencing from school to university level in writing a paragraph that

was not explored in the selected ways. In this regard, the study was carried out to explore the Bachelor-level learners ' experiences in writing paragraphs in the English language. To meet the objectives, the questions that tried to be answered were: to what extent are the Bachelor in Education first-year learners familiar with the components of a good paragraph? How did they happen to have knowledge about the writing paragraph? How are they using the theoretical knowledge in writing paragraphs? How the teachers have been supporting them to write a good paragraph from school to university level? and to what extent are they using theoretical knowledge of paragraph writing in their writing task? So this article contributes to the learners and teachers to be aware of writing paragraphs explicitly as a basic unit of good academic write-ups.

Methodology

In practical formal teaching and learning context, I wanted to explore the Bachelor level learners' experiences in writing paragraphs from their perspective. As Taylor, Taylor, and Luitel (2012) discussed interpretive paradigm aims to generate a context-based understanding of people's thoughts, beliefs, values, and associated social norms, I wanted to explore the learners' experiences related to paragraph writing making very close rapport with them and interpret the issues from their eyes.

The reality that guides this research is pluralism which believes that there is no single reality: not only one way of learning paragraph writing, learners experience multiple ways of writing paragraphs. The learners' multiple perspectives of learning paragraph writing were explored by working very closely with them and knowledge was interpreted from their worldviews. My aim was neither to generalize the experiences nor emancipate the learning but to understand the situation how they are learning to write paragraphs as Scotland (2012) mentioned, the interpretive paradigm seeks to understand the situation with inductive methodology.

To this line, I used a qualitative narrative approach to explore and describe as suggested by Creswell (2014) the experiences of the participants. Further, narrative is the study of the ways how human beings experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin 2016). In this study, Bachelor level learners are the storytellers that I have collected because I wanted to retell the participants' stories and experiences in paragraph writing to make meaning in the form of textual themes. I collected the information with the help of focused interview guidelines and focused group discussion as the method of interpreting participants' perspectives (Tubey, Rotich, & Bengat, 2015).

I conveniently selected Surkhet Multiple Campus as the study site because I have been teaching for a decade and experienced the problem among the learners as well. It was easy to access with the informants being a teacher on that campus. It was also easy to make a good rapport with them and minimize the ethical issues to make minimize. The participants were selected from the same class as I am a teacher teaching them online. I informally shared my study experiences from my school to university life to make a good rapport with them. I also added my experiences about my childhood vocabulary learning and linked them with the experience of writing paragraphs. I dug information on how they learned and who taught them to write a paragraph. I encouraged them to share what should be given the focus while writing paragraphs. I also talked about their experiences writing paragraphs in the form of homework or assignment. I tried to dig into their experience of how they feel while writing a paragraph in exam papers and other informal or formal kinds of writing tasks.

As an ethno-narrative, as suggested by Creswell (2014), all five participants were selected by the purposeful sampling method. They were from Bachelor's in education currently studying in the first year

with various majoring subjects and school education backgrounds as well. Participant A was a 19-year-old female student from the town area of Surkhet district. She has passed her Secondary Education Examination from the English medium Boarding school, and 11th and 12th grades from a public school in the town area. She seemed satisfied with her school-level education and now happily studying majoring in English. On the other hand, participant B was a 19-year-old blind male student from the remote village of Salyan district and has been living in Surkhet to study majoring in English. He has passed the Secondary Education Examination from the public school of his own village and 11th and 12th grades from the public school of the town area of Banke district. He did not seem unhappy being blind and studying with other normal students except with a little desire to have been cared for. Likewise, participant C was a 19-year-old female student from the Dailekh district. She studied up to 4th grade in a private English medium boarding school and has passed the Secondary Education Examination and 11th and 12th grades from public school. Now she is studying majoring in health and physical education. Another participant D was a 19-year-old male student from the Surkhet district. He has completed all his school education: Secondary Education Examination, 11th and 12th grades from the public school in a remote village area. Now he is studying in majoring health and physical education. Next, participant E was a 19-year-old female student from the Dailekh district. She has completed all her school education: Secondary Education Examination, 11th and 12th grades from the public school in a remote village area. Now she is studying in majoring health and physical education.

To collect the purposeful information, the narrative-focused interview was used that produced open-ended information (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, the participants were also grouped together and involved in the focused group discussion for the exploration of their stories.

As mentioned by Creswell (2014) for the collection of detailed information, I, being a teacher made rapport with the selected participants by telling my own story about the activities that I did when I was at the Bachelor's level on the same campus and told my particular purpose to talk about their experiences. I, then, requested them to give me a few hours of time for some days. On the basis of the time, they have given to me. I met them in a group first attempt to collect the data. I made voice recordings taking permission from them. Then they were ready to meet me personally in the next meeting. I met them individually and had interviewed them. It was recorded and I also made note of their gestural communication and other non-linguistic means of communication. As per my request, after a couple of days, they agreed to be together for a focused group discussion. The discussion was led by me and openly shared learning stories related to writing paragraphs which were audiotaped. They said they enjoyed talking about paragraph writing and which developed a kind of awareness in writing tasks.

For the data analysis, I used a general inductive approach explained by Thomas (2006) which derived the findings from the evaluation objectives. The flexible nature of themes was developed that is not based on any pre-existing theory or concept. To generate knowledge from the data using the back and forth process, I transcribed the collected information, read and coded, categorized, and made themes from them as the finding iteratively (Murray, & Moore 2006).

I was aware of making the study trustworthiness or quality standard so I did every step of the research activities carefully. To this point, Lincoln and Guba (1985) as cited in (Thomas, 2006) presented the four strategies for trustworthiness as credibility (by means of peer debriefing, and stakeholders' check), transferability (to what extent the result is generalizable in another similar context), dependability (conducting the research audit: compare the data, findings, and interpretations), and confirmability (could be confirmed by the other researchers). So I had made the recording of their stories and made supported

them with note-making for the confirmation of the non-linguistic means of communication. After making the transcription of what they narrated, I sat with them informally and I did debriefing for the confirmation checks. I also read every document for them if they wanted to say the same thing or different. As they agreed about the sense, I was confirmed about the right interpretation of the stories that they experienced.

To manage the ethical issue, I had told them to be involved voluntarily in the study activities. I also had taken oral consent from them. Further, I used pseudonyms/codes as A, B, C, D, and E, in place of the real name of the participants. I made them assure that the information will not be used in other fields, this will be used only in this research. I did not ask them about other information except related to research objectives, I was careful in every step of the activities not to harm them personally and professionally. As Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2016) suggested, every interpretation was reconfirmed by presenting to participants which maintained the ethical consideration.

Results and Discussion

While exploring the Bachelor in education learners' experiences via informal talks and a focused interview with the five selected participants. It shows that learners were encouraged to write tasks in the form of points rather than paragraphs. As the learners were not aware of the topic statement, supportive sentences, and concluding sentences as the main components of a good paragraph. Even if they are ever involved in writing paragraphs in almost all the writing tasks, they were not given input and feedback explicitly, instead, they were told to write paragraphs by the teachers. The main findings of how the Bachelor's level learners are experiencing writing a paragraph are presented on the following three themes.

Focused on Writing Points Rather Than a Paragraph

The learners understood that writing answers in points are better than writing in paragraphs. As most of the teachers write points on the board and involve in the discussion of the topic. Learners are also encouraged to write points for the assignment and in the exam too. So they were not aware of making paragraphs well organized. Participant A expressed:

All the time teachers write points on the board and discuss them in class. Most of the time, teachers tell us to write points in the exam rather than a paragraph. We also memorize the points and write counting the points and marks. Our friends talk about writing more points in the exam than writing a paragraph. Points are better than the paragraph so we write points in the exam. As the homework, teachers in college, give very little time to check homework and they search for how many points are written on the answer sheet. So just write very few points and teachers tell us to explain in the points rather than in the paragraph.

The learners feel easier to memorize the points and write in the exam as well as in the assignments. They also can discuss with friends on the basis of points. As a result, they were not aware of writing paragraphs, rather they were inspired to write points. The learners should be made aware of using points as the basics for organizing a good paragraph. The learning strategies also can be used in writing a good paragraph as learning to write a paragraph is also a kind of learning. Metacognitive strategy (Dewita, 2020) can be a strategy to improve the learning process of writing development. As stated by them, it is a learning strategy that makes students use their own knowledge or strategies to help them accomplish a task by planning, monitoring, problem-solving, and evaluating. So while writing a paragraph, the learners can make use of planning to write as one step, monitor their writing as the next step, manage the paragraph in another step, and they can make a judgment of their own paragraph whether it is purposeful and well organized or not.

The learners realized that writing points are more important than writing paragraphs. They experienced that writing many points means writing more and writing paragraphs shows little knowledge in the form of text. Participant B said:

And our teacher many times tells us to write points in the exam so we write more points than the paragraph in the exam. In homework also when we write in points, our teacher become happy. They said how many points did you write, they do not ask how many paragraphs, they asked how many points. I think point writing is good and easy for us than writing a paragraph. Paragraphs become small but point many.

The learners wrongly understood that when they write in the form of points, they will score better marks in the exam. They also thought mistakenly that it will be less amount when they write in the form of a paragraph rather than points.

Lack of Sufficient Input and Feedback

Input and feedback are the most important factors for learners, especially in second language learning situations. The input provides the data for learning and feedback helps to follow the right path of learning. But these two were less experienced by the learners in writing paragraphs as participant E said:

I do not remember about my other lower classes whether a teacher taught or not about writing paragraphs but I remember as I was in 6th or 7th grade, our teacher taught us to write paragraphs. After that, no teachers told us to write paragraphs this way and that way but told us to write paragraphs. No students asked the teacher how to write a paragraph. Instead, they used to write paragraphs that the teacher told as homework and the teacher gave tick marks. If the answer is correct, the teacher tells thank you and good. If we do not know the answer, sir said you cannot write a paragraph and how you passed the exam. In fact, we memorize answers in the exam to pass the exams.

The learners experienced not having enough input and sufficient feedback in their writing tasks. The teachers give writing tasks but do not give insight into how to write a good paragraph. The teachers did not even take the learners' problem of not being able to write paragraphs seriously. Taking reference from Krashen, Gass, and Selinker (2008) state that there should be a sufficient quantity of comprehensible input for the success of the learners in their second language learning.

The learners expected more input as they are even if at the higher level of study but did not get in their college-level of study. In this regard, participant A expressed:

Writing paragraphs was taught in my lower grades nine or ten. No teachers taught to write paragraphs during the 11th and 12th grades. We are not told how to write paragraphs at the bachelor level but only teachers tell us to write paragraphs, they do not say ways of writing.

As the learners were somehow told ways of writing paragraphs in their early level of learning, they need continuation of the input and feedback at a higher level too. The learners are expecting from teachers more insight and further explicit ideas for their paragraph writing skill development. As Gass and Selinker (2008) suggest, explicit or implicit feedback provides the learners with additional information to get success in their learning.

Unfamiliarity and Overgeneralization

Most of the participants did not know the components of a good paragraph. They did not know the situation of changing paragraphs. Participant B expressed:

I said to change the paragraph when it becomes longer. I have no idea when to change the paragraph. I think when it is larger we can change it. If we know the answer, it will be a paragraph. If we do not know the answer how can it be a paragraph. So if we know the answer, there is a paragraph.

The learners were not familiar with the topic statement, supportive sentences, and concluding sentences which are the components of a well-organized paragraph. And when to change paragraphs.

A new paragraph can be constructed to give a coherent but new idea to demonstrate. But the learners did not have an intended motive of changing paragraphs while writing paragraphs for the written tasks to be completed. Participant C tells:

We write it and change it when it becomes larger. The big writing is not good so we have to change the paragraph. We are not thinking about how to write a paragraph, we think to write the answer. We think we should not take seriously this in the exam. If we know the answer we can write anyway. If we do not know the answer how can we make a paragraph? It becomes a paragraph itself when we write an answer.

The learners did not have well-known insight into the idea of changing paragraphs as needed to demonstrate new information. They only change paragraphs to avoid bigger text and make the text smaller. The supportive assumption of gender differences is found in Beard and Burrell, 2010; Berninger and Fuller, 1992; Olinghouse, 2008; Troia et al., 2013 as cited in (Al-Saadi, 2020), they clearly mentioned that a broad potential of differences in gender has been identified in writing which is not realized in this narrative.

The organizing parts of an essay and a paragraph are not the same. But the learners experienced that they were confidently claimed that the introduction, body, and conclusion are the components of a good paragraph to be well organized. Participants A and C said:

The parts of a good paragraph are the introduction, body, and conclusion. I am confirmed these are the parts of a good paragraph.

The learners have used the knowledge that they learn to write essays are also generalized to be used in writing paragraphs. The overgeneralized knowledge can lead to erroneous output which needs to be corrected by the teacher in second language learning. Similar to the above explanation and taking consider to all aspects of writing. As Sabra (2014) has described CAF (Consider All Factors) strategy, can be used in writing a good paragraph. Furthermore, CAF is explained as a thinking process: a kind of preparation, and reasoning exercise: to claim what should be involved in writing and what should be extracted from the particular writing task in the form of a paragraph. It is suggested to do brainstorming as the prewriting strategy to collect ideas. The next step is planning what to write and how to write. Another strategy is decision making what to include and exclude in the written form and the next is drawing a conclusion or making a judgment. Thus CAF involves a structured thinking process which may result in finding all elements and steps needed to achieve a paragraph as the basic but the most important unit of academic writing.

Although there is little evidence, it is found studying various literature and observing the daily activities that there are differences in word choices and style of using language between males and females. In our daily life observation, we see males and females are using somehow different strategies in doing day-to-day work. Comparatively, most females have naturally got melodious voices than males. Gender differences are also reflected in the selection of the vocabulary in speaking: females use more polite words compared to males. According to Abdollahzadeh (2010), the males are found to prefer to work alone in a quiet environment and the females are involved in writing tasks being more interested in getting good grades shows that gender variation in doing work. From this study, I tried to explore how the participants

have been experienced writing paragraphs. But were not found gender-based varieties in the narratives of participants as the experience of writing paragraphs.

Conclusion

From the study of selected participants, it was felt that the learners are facing problems working with a paragraph at the university level where courses demand a more formal and organized way of writing. Not only in this narrative but also one study published in Sudan showed that 'students have various problems in an organization such as not differentiating between topic and closing sentences, not developing a paragraph properly, or not focusing on one idea in their paragraph' (Siddiqui 2020,p.100). To this point, Ragasa and Tadesse (2021) mentioned that the role of writing a good paragraph is not counted easy and suggested making paragraphs well-formed as the foundation of any academic written work.

A claim mentioned in (Thonus, 1999), some gender effects remain in the work of writing tasks made the researcher relate the study with gender but was not found evidence that show varies in experiences in writing a paragraph.

To conclude, it was explored that the selected Bachelor level learners have a lack of awareness of using the knowledge of paragraph writing in their practical life. It is because of one-off input at the school level which was not sufficient. In fact, the experiences shared in the focused group discussion were not found different than the interviewed information. Neither the theoretical nor the practical input was continued in the higher level on writing paragraphs. As a result, they did not have insight from the teachers at the college level. Even if they have some information about writing a paragraph, they have overgeneralized and mixed up the parts of paragraphs with the components of writing essays. They were confidently perceived that they can make a paragraph as they write answers. There is the automatic process of developing a paragraph. When information is collected in the form of an answer, there will be a paragraph. The paragraph is to be changed when there is a large amount of information within it. They did not know, it needs to be changed the paragraph in case of writing new information in a coherent way. So the learners should explicitly be given theoretical knowledge in writing paragraphs as the input that improves their writing skills practically not only at school but at the university level too.

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