

## The Study of Errors in Paragraph Writing on Iranian EFL Students

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**Abstract:** The aim of the paper is to examine types of errors of paragraph writing of Iranian learners of English at under-graduate level in Bushehr University of Medical Sciences and Health Services. The data for this study were 90 first year medical students at under-graduate level in Bushehr University of Medical Sciences and Health Services as foreign language learners participated in this research. The outcome of the study shows that the total number of errors committed by the learners was 290. Based on the classification, it was found that the total number of errors committed by the students was 209 in pre-test of the paragraph writing and in the post-test of the paragraph writing was 81. The result of the study showed a significant difference between pre-test and post-test in paragraph writing of Iranian EFL students.

**Key words:** Error • Error analysis • Paragraph writing • EFL learners

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### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the research is to examine the errors of paragraph writing such as Topic Sentence, Supporting Sentence, Supporting Details and Closing Sentence in writing of Iranian learners of English at under-graduate level in Bushehr University of Medical Sciences and Health Services. Errors are an important source of information to decide the learners' strategy in learning and are found in the learners' output. Error analysis always plays an important role in language teaching. Corder [1] stated that "errors are 'the result of some failure of performance [p.152]". Norrish [2] defined "an error' as a systematic deviation that happens when a learner has not learnt something and consistently get(s) it wrong [p.7]". Nanjiah [3] argued that error analysis is a very fertile land for researchers and linguists. The learning of writing is one of the most important skills that second and foreign language learners need to develop their ability to communicate ideas and information effectively in target language. Today, writing can be recognized as an integral part of language learning process in ELT classroom. It is felt that Iranian students such as the other learners around world need English language in general and English writing in particular, to communicate with the other people and make progress in their real life situation, because today English language has become a necessity all over the world.

English is used as an international language among all nations in the world. No doubt, learning English requires mastering the four language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. Writing requires thinking and cognitive processes to be produced. It is considered the most complex skill because it goes through different stages i.e., prewriting, writing and editing, to reach its final product. Trembley [4] viewed writing as a hard and risky skill. Additionally, writing involves different aspects such as spelling, punctuation, organization...etc.

Despite its complexity, writing is very important for communication. It creates a communication channel between the writer and the reader. It is needed to transfer messages, letters and knowledge, to take exams and to maintain learning. However, proficiency in one's native language does not necessarily lead to proficiency in L2 writing [5].

Many researchers have argued that writing is art and writer is artist, from of this point of view, the researchers believe that writing is not easy even for the native speaker. Many nativespeakers find difficulties in mastering the writing skill [6]. Nonetheless, writing is a crucial skill that is poorly acquired, researches into writing problems seem to be behind those examining other language areas [7]. Chidambaram [8] Argued that writing is a conscious, deliberate and planned activity. Writing has been regarded as an alternative medium of language, as it gives permanence to utterances. Writing

enables the transmission of ideas over vast distances of time and space and is a pre-requisite of a complex civilization.

The main focus of this research is to express English EFL learners' errors at the paragraph level. Therefore, paragraph writing or the organization of a paragraph is of primary importance. However, writing builds larger units from smaller ones; that is, writers use words to make sentences, sentences to make paragraphs and paragraphs to make such compositions as letters, reports and college themes [9]. Rajatanun [10] said that "a paragraph is a unit of writing which expresses one central idea and consists of two kinds of sentences: a topic sentence and a number of supporting statements [p.95]." Jayakaran [11] argued that "the basic unit of any writing, be it a composition, an essay, an article of general nature, a short story or even a humour piece, is the paragraph [p.7]". A paragraph may consist of 2 to 10 sentences. There are three types of sentences: Simple, Complex and Compound. Any paragraph would contain a combination of all these types. O'Donnell and Paiva [12] provided more details about the essential parts for paragraph writing which include a topic sentence, supporting sentences, details, logical order, logical connectors, a concluding sentence, unity and coherence. Owl [13] clarified a paragraph as a group of closely-related sentences which deal with and develop one idea. According to him, it is like a family in which all members are related; likewise, all sentences in the paragraph are related. Almost every piece of writing that is longer than a few sentences should be organized into paragraphs. Besides, Baker [14] described this unit as a collection of connected sentences which show building blocks of solid ideas that are organized smoothly around one single idea in the paragraph.

The structure of a paragraph consists of three important elements, they are as follows:

- The topic sentence: it introduces the paragraph and tells the reader what your paragraph will be about. The usual position of the topic sentence is at the beginning of the paragraph but it can sometimes occur anywhere in such unit.
- The supporting sentences (main points): they come after the topic sentence, to explain your topic sentence. The supporting sentences with their supporting details make up the body of a paragraph.
- The closing sentence (conclusion): the closing sentence is the last sentence in a paragraph. It restates the main idea of the paragraph using different words and tells the reader what you were writing about.

**Review of the Literature:** Pertinent studies related to error analysis by researchers in error studies are discussed below:

Olsen [15] Carried out research in English written by Norwegian EFL learners. Language problems on different linguistic levels were analyzed and the theory of compensatory strategies was used. The results showed that less proficient learners had a higher number of grammatical, orthographic and syntactic errors, which can be attributed to cross-linguistic influence. Tananart [16] examined errors in comparison and contrast paragraphs written by EFL university students at the Chulalongkorn University. The major type of errors were grammatical structure (73.86%) and the other types of errors were errors in using transition signals (10.01%), verb forms (7.68%), word choice (6.90%) and spelling (1.55%). Almaden [17] conducted a research in the topical progression in paragraphs written by Filipino ESL students. The paragraphs were analyzed using Lautamatti's topical structure analysis (TSA), which examines the internal topical structure by looking at the repetition of key words and phrases and provides insights into the internal coherence in paragraphs. It was found that parallel progression was most frequently used in the paragraphs, followed by extended and sequential progressions. The extended sequential progression was least used. Khansir [18] examined the syntactic errors such as auxiliary verbs, passive voice, indirect form, preposition, tag question, relative pronouns, WH-question and tense in writing of Iranian and Indian students. The results of his study showed that the total number of errors committed by the Iranian students was 2841 and that of their Indian peers was 3736. The largest number of errors committed by subjects was from the realm of the "indirect form" (1014) and the minimum number of errors recorded in this study was "relative pronouns" (533). Khansir [19] analyzed the written errors such as paragraph, punctuation, articles, spelling and conjunction in writing of Iranian and Indian students. The results of the study indicated that the total number of errors committed by the Iranian students was 3045 and that of their Indian peers was 3274. The maximum errors made by the subjects were from the realm of 'punctuation' (1387). The number of errors made by the Indian students in the use of punctuation was 718 which came to 22% for errors in punctuation. The Iranian students committed 669 errors. They constituted 22% of errors for punctuation. Thus, the minimum number of errors recorded in writing in this study was 'spelling.' The total number of errors in the use of spelling was 1050. The number of errors committed by the Iranian students in the

use of spelling was 578 which come to 19% for errors in spelling. The number of errors committed by the Indian students was 472. They constituted 14% of errors for spelling. Gustilo and Magno [20] investigated the sentence-level errors of freshmen students at three proficiency levels and the aspects of writing that raters focused on while rating the essays. Most of the findings of the study corroborated the findings of previous studies on error analysis and essay evaluation-that sentence-level errors had a significant role in essay scores. Ning [21] studied writing errors in compositions written by graduate students at Qufu Normal University in China. The result of the study indicated that the main causes errors in this research were mother tongue interference, misuse of strategies and negative influence.

**Hypotheses of the Study:** The hypotheses were formulated that are considered as follows:

- H1:** There is a significant difference in types of errors between pre-test and post-test in paragraph writing of Iranian EFL students.
- H2:** There is a significant difference in number of errors between pre-test and post-test in topic sentence of Iranian EFL students.
- H3:** There is a significant difference in number of errors between pre-test and post-test in supporting sentence of Iranian EFL students.
- H4:** There is a significant difference in number of errors between pre-test and post-test in supporting details of Iranian EFL students.
- H5:** There is a significant difference in number of errors between pre-test and post-test in closing sentence of Iranian EFL students.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study concentrates on the errors of paragraph writing of learners of English at under-graduate level in Bushehr University of Medical Sciences and Health Services. The methodology adopted in this study consisted of the processes: A. Data collection and B. Data analysis. The collection of data in any study is usually determined by its objectives. The collection of data in this study was used in terms of the objectives: a) to examine types of errors in target language (i.e. English language). Errors are classified in paragraph writing; b) to examine

Table 1: Age and Frequency of the subjects

Age	Frequency
19-21	79
21-23	11

types of errors in paragraph writing of Iranian Medical students and c) to suggest remedial measure to overcome the committing of errors. The data was analyzed utilizing the computer programmed from SPSS in this research.

**Participants:** The subjects for this study were 90 students at under-graduate level, in Bushehr University of Medical Sciences and Health Services. English language is used as foreign language for Iranian learners. In addition, the age of the students fall in the range of age19 to 23. Table 1 emerges after analyzing the range of the students' ages.

**Instruments:** The instruments utilized in this study were such as a) A General English Proficiency Test for determining the proficiency level in English of the participants; b) A background questionnaire to elicit information on subjects' age, gender and level of education and Pre- test and Post -test of paragraph writing were developed by the investigators. The General English Proficiency Test (Transparent) consisted of 50 multiple choice vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension items. The test was selected to assess the participant's level of proficiency in English. The background questionnaire for this study was designed to elicit information on subjects. The questionnaire developed by the present researchers consisted of 10 questions which were related to their residential address; age, language use, information about the parents, details about siblings, language attitude, etc. Pre-test and post-test of paragraph writing have been used for collecting data in this research. The Pre-test and post-test of paragraph writing was designed to measure knowledge of English paragraph writing of Iranian students in an academic work.

The Pre-test and post-test of paragraph writing used to identify the types of errors for this study. The tests were chosen to examine the ability of the subjects in selecting the correct paragraph writing rules in English.

**Procedure:** To achieve the objectives of this study the procedures were adopted: Development of the questionnaire; Administration of the proficiency test; Development of the paragraph writing test and its administration and Analysis of collected data. Before focusing on the paragraph writing test which plays the

role of a pedestal function in this study, the present researchers developed and administered the background questionnaire and English general proficiency test. The proficiency test was administered to the Bushehr University of Medical students. In administering the test; the Researchers piloted the test for the target group. In addition, 15 students in the target group were used as participants in this research. The General English Proficiency Test was found to be appropriate for the participants' performing level. Its reliability through the K-R 21 formula turned out to be .66 for the target group. In this experiment, the students who scored between one standard deviation below or above the mean score were selected for the purpose of collecting data in the present study. The background questionnaire was designed in order to elicit information on subjects. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items which were related to their residential address, age, language use, information about the parents, details about siblings, language attitude etc. The test was administered to the Bushehr University of Medical students. The time limit was, therefore, set. Thus, before the collection of data, the participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to investigate a research work and the test result would not affect their annual examination results or any other results. The paragraph writing test was chosen to help in the fulfillment of aims set forth in this study. For this purpose, the researchers developed the test through the following writing books, the researchers developed the paragraph writing test related to the present study, because one of the basic principles of selecting a test is to use the scientific books related to the test materials.

- Reddy, K.G., 2006. Paragraph Writing.
- Arnaudet, L.M. and M.E. Barrett, 1990. Paragraph Development.

In addition, the present researchers visited Bushehr University of Medical Sciences and Health Services discussed with English teachers and studied prescribed text books and syllabus. Thus, the researchers have taught Paragraph writing in the university. The test was administered to the Bushehr University of Medical students. The time-limit was set in such a way as to allow all the students to attempt every item in the test with ease. The researchers cleared the students' doubts during the test. The Researchers had to exclude 20 students from this study, because they had skipped answering most of questions. The remainders were selected for computer analysis.

The data was analyzed utilizing a T-test and MC Ne mar test statistical techniques in order to answer the research hypothesis posed in this study. The analysis of data was concerned with the tests: General English Proficiency Test (Transparent); Background Questionnaire and Paragraph Writing Test. The tests were analyzed utilizing the computer programmed from SPSS. The statistical analysis proceeded in three steps: first analysis, before making any attempt to investigate the hypotheses of this study, (Errors of this study), the General English Proficiency Test was examined. The actual scores of the subjects on the test were examined. After this analysis, the subjects were selected for the purpose of the collecting data. In second analysis, the Background Questionnaire was used to elicit information on the subjects. In the last analysis, the Paragraph Writing Test was used to investigate the hypotheses of the study and the errors committed by the subjects in Bushehr University of Medical Sciences in Bushehr City. The analysis of work in this study was concerned with the processes: Classification of errors; Comparison of errors; Explanation of errors and Suggestion of remedial measures. In this process, an attempt was made to classify errors committed by the students in Bushehr University of Medical Sciences. In the second process, an attempt was made to compare types of errors in paragraph writing of Bushehr University of Medical Sciences students. In the third process, an attempt was made to explain the errors in terms of whether an error is due to incomplete knowledge or lack of knowledge of English rules, etc. The last attempt was made to suggest remedial measures to overcome the committing of errors on the basis of insight gained into the nature of errors in foreign language learning for foreign language learners. The aim is to help the students to improve their language and use English flawlessly.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The 290 errors which were utilized in the paragraph writing test for this study were classified into two major parts: Pre-test and Post-test. Based on the classification, it was found that the total number of errors committed by the students was 209 in pre-test of the paragraph writing and in the post-test of the paragraph writing was 81. The four major categories such as Topic sentence, Supporting Sentence, Supporting details and Closing sentence have been presented in Table 2.

Table 2 showed that the largest number of errors committed by the subjects was from the realm of the

Table 2: Number and Percentage of Paragraph Writing Errors between pre-test and post-test

Test Item	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Errors	Percentages	Errors	Percentages
Topic sentence	47	%52.2	15	%16.7
Supporting sentences	45	%50	16	%17.8
Supporting details	63	%70	28	%31.1
Closing sentence	54	%60	22	%24.4
Total	209	%0.5805	81	%0.225

Table 3: The Mean and Standard Deviation of Paragraph Writing Errors between Pre-test and Post –test

Test	Mean	N	Std. deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	1.6778	90	.77645	.08184
Post-test	3.1000	90	.82175	.08662

Table 4: The Mean and Standard Deviation of Topic Sentence Errors between Pre-test and Post –test

Test Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-Topic sentence	90	.4778	.50230	.00	1.00
Post-topic sentence	90	.8333	.37477	.00	1.00

supporting details test (91). The number of errors committed by the students in 'wrong use of supporting details in pre-test of the paragraph writing was 63 which came to %70 for errors in this area. The number of supporting details errors caused by the students in post-test was 28 which came to %31.1. The minimum number of errors recorded in the paragraph writing test in this research was 'supporting sentence (61). The number of errors committed by the students in wrong use of supporting sentence in pre-test was 45 which came to %50. The students committed 16 errors in post-test in this category. They constituted %17.8 of errors for supporting sentence. The other areas, the students committed errors were topic sentence and closing sentence. The number of the students' errors in general in topic sentence was (62). The number of the students' errors in 'wrong use of topic sentence in pre-test of the paragraph writing was 47 which came to % 52.2 whereas the number of errors in post-test of this category was 15 which came to %16.7. The last category of the paragraph writing test was closing sentence. The number of the students' errors in wrong use of closing sentence in pre-test of the paragraph writing was 54 which came to %60 whereas the number of errors in wrong use of closing sentence in post-test of the paragraph writing was 22 which came to %24.4. The study has collected some important information from the Iranian Bushehr University of Medical Sciences students' paragraph writing. First of all, the study revealed that the students need to be awareness of the vital role of paragraph writing in their course study and in real life situation. Second, the

students did not have good knowledge of paragraph writing in English. Third, the students should be familiar with the use of paragraph writing in English. The last item is that the students should recognize the differences between elements of paragraph writing; the students should know how to build a topic sentence and supporting sentence along with its supporting details and develop a main idea in their paragraph writing.

English is used as foreign language in Iran. In Iran, in English classrooms, is not restrict spent on writing as written communication, many teachers feel that they cannot teach this skill, but, they focuses on only to grammar. From this point of the view, if many English teachers have eligible to teach writing, they prefer to teach product approach, as writing skill to their students and neglect process approach as other area of writing process. According to Khansir [24] Product approach to the teaching of writing emphasizes mechanical aspects of writing such as focusing on grammatical and syntactical structures and imitating models and this approach is primarily concerned with correctness and form of the final product, whereas, Process approach emphasizes that writing itself is a developmental process that creates self-discovery and meaning. It is concerned with the process of how ideas are developed and formulated in writing. Consequently, the students have not good opportunity to develop their skill of writing in classroom and out of classroom. After completed their course, they face writing problems in their academic work, they are not able to use their English writing proficiency in real life situations in fact that they will go wastage.

Table 5: The Mean and Standard Deviation of Supporting Sentence Errors between Pre-test and Post –test

Test Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-Supporting sentences	90	.5000	.50280	.00	1.00
Post-supporting sentences	90	.8222	.38447	.00	1.00

Table 6: The Mean and Standard Deviation of Supporting Details Errors between Pre-test and Post –test

Test Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-Supporting details	90	.3000	.46082	.00	1.00
Post-supporting details	90	.6889	.46554	.00	1.00

Table 7: The Mean and Standard Deviation of Closing Sentence Errors between Pre-test and Post –test

Test Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-Closing sentence	90	.4000	.49264	.00	1.00
Post-closing sentence	90	.7556	.43216	.00	1.00

**The Hypotheses of the Study:** The hypotheses were formulated that are considered as follows:

**H1:** There is a significant difference in types of errors between pre-test and post-test in paragraph writing of Iranian EFL students.

The results revealed that there is a significant difference in types of errors between pre-test and post-test in paragraph writing of Iranian EFL students. Using t-test and MC Ne mar test determined mean scores, (the pre-test mean scores = 1.6778 and the post-test mean scores = 3.1000) and also standard deviation of the students (the pre-test =.77645 and the post-test =.82175), the inference from present research concludes that the Iranian students have committed more errors in pre-test of paragraph writing as compared to the post-test of paragraph writing.

**H2:** There is a significant difference in number of errors between pre-test and post-test in topic sentence of Iranian EFL students.

T-test and MC Ne mar test were used to determine if there is a significant difference in number of errors between pre-test and post-test in topic sentence of Iranian EFL students. Result revealed, in general, there is a significant difference in number of errors between pre-test and post-test in topic sentence of the students. With respect to the mean scores, the pre-test (M=.4778 SD=.50230) the students have committed more errors in pre-test of topic sentence than the post-test of topic sentence (M=.8333SD=.37477).

**H3:** There is a significant difference in number of errors between pre-test and post-test in supporting sentence of Iranian EFL students.

In supporting sentence category, t-test and MC Ne mar test revealed a high significant difference between the pre-test and post-test in number of errors of the students. An examination of Table supports this result. The students in supporting sentence category have committed fewer errors in post-test than pre-test. With respect to the mean scores, the pre-test (M=.5000 SD=.50280) and the post-test of topic sentence (M=.8222=.38447).

**H4:** There is a significant difference in number of errors between pre-test and post-test in supporting details of Iranian EFL students.

In supporting details, a high significant difference was found between the mean scores. The mean scores refer to this fact that the students had problems in term of using supporting details in a proper place in the performance of their pre-test.

**H5:** There is a significant difference in number of errors between pre-test and post-test in closing sentence of Iranian EFL students.

T-test and MC Ne mar test were used to indicate whether there is a significant difference or not in number of errors between pre-test and post-test in closing sentence of the students. Table 7 revealed that there is significant difference in number of errors between pre-test and post-test in closing sentence of the students. With respect to the mean scores the pre-test were (M =.4000-SD =.49264) and the post-test (M=.7556-SD =.43216).

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study, which in many ways is similar to the findings of previous studies, showed the

Iranian foreign language learners were not aware of rules of paragraph writing of English. It was found that in general there exist systematic errors in learners' target language. Therefore, it seems that there are several other sources which could be held responsible for the occurrence of the errors in this research. The sources of the errors could be interference of the mother tongue of the students, complexity of the English language, students' incomplete knowledge or lack of knowledge of paragraph writing in English language. In this research, it was found that in general the students committed more errors of the paragraph writing in pre-test than their post-test. The difference in the number of errors in the pre-test and post-test of the paragraph writing committed by the learners can be attributed to a number of factors. Although, within the scope of this study no particular investigation was concluded to empirically identify all the factors which caused the discrepancy in the number of errors committed by the learners in paragraph writing in the two types of test, it was found that teaching English and learning strategies could be responsible for the increase or decrease in the number of errors in the students' paragraph writing in the Bushehr University of Medical Sciences and Health Services. The English teachers should aware their learners how to write a good paragraph in English and help them in order to reduce their errors in general in English writing and in particular, in English paragraph writing. The teachers should be familiar with the difference between the first and the target language (English). From this point of the view, the teachers should increase the number of exercises, drills and classroom activities for English paragraph. However,, remedial materials, teaching programmes and planning of learning strategies can be designed or used to enable the students to improve their language and use the target language (English) flawlessly.

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